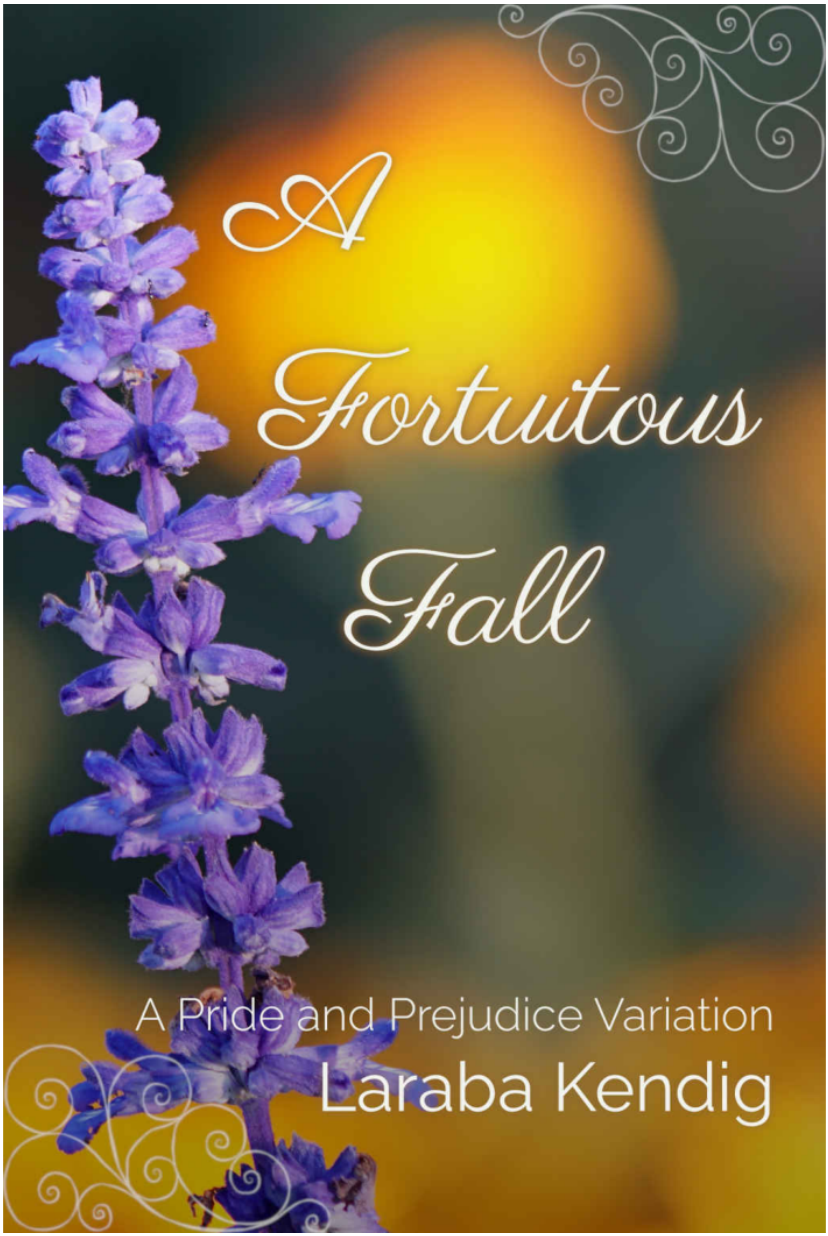

A
Fortuitous
Fall
A Pride and Prejudice Variation
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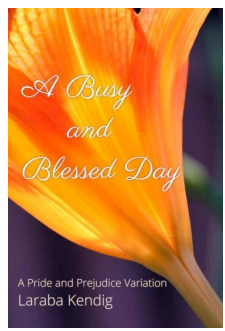
By Laraba Kendig

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Regency Romance Books by Laraba Kendig
About the Author
Dedication

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Sign up to get a FREE story just for members called *A Busy and Blessed Day*. You will also be among the first to hear when my next book is released, about special promotions, etc. Click here to get your free book.



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Chapter 1

Netherfield Hall was ablaze with lights, and Mr. William Collins, heir to the estate of Longbourn, rector to Lady Catherine de Bourgh of Rosings, smiled with delight as he exited the carriage. A moment later, mindful of his duties, he turned back to hand his chosen bride out of the carriage. He had not yet offered for Miss Elizabeth's hand, but the time would come, and soon. Perhaps tomorrow?

Miss Elizabeth took his hand with winsome hesitation; she was a delicate flower, his fair cousin, beautiful and very clever. He had never imagined, while still a youth living in a dreary house in Kensington with his miserly father, that he would have a handsome gentlewoman as his bride. But here he was, rector of Lady Catherine de Bourgh herself and heir to a small but well-tended estate.

His future was wonderfully bright.

The Bennet family, the father, mother, and five mostly handsome daughters, wended their way to the front door of Netherfield with

Mr. Collins, oddly enough, in their wake. He had meant to stay close to the woman who would soon be his wife, but she was quick on her feet, Miss Elizabeth, and he found himself briefly distracted by the front edifice of Netherfield. The building had been designed with a neoclassical style vaguely reminiscent of the early designs of the architect John Nash, who had …

But no, that was of no importance at all. Architecture was the concern of the upper classes and royalty, not Mr. Collins of Hunsford parsonage.

The foyer of Netherfield, with its receiving line, also had its distractions. Various paintings and sketches adorned the walls, including one which was quite definitely an early work of J. F. M. Turner. What was such a precious object doing in a leased home?

No, that was of no importance either! He must focus on the matter at hand!

“Welcome to Netherfield, Mr. Collins,” Mr. Bingley, the master of Netherfield, said with a friendly smile. He was a pleasant chap, Mr. Bingley, and destined to wed Miss Jane Bennet, the eldest of the Bennet sisters. Collins

would have chosen Jane if she had not been already spoken for; she was even lovelier than her sister Elizabeth. But Collins knew it would not do to poach such a handsome woman from another man.

"Thank you, Mr. Bingley," he replied exuberantly. "It is truly my delight to be here this night. You are so kind to invite me when I am not well known to you at all. It reminds me of the gracious condescension of my esteemed patroness, Lady Catherine de Bourgh!"

He would have continued in this vein if he had not observed Miss Elizabeth slipping away down the main hallway toward a cacophony of noise. She had agreed, with becoming modesty, to dance the first set with him, and he must be there when the music began.

With a lengthy apology — it would not do to insult his host and his sisters, Mrs. Hurst and Miss Bingley — he darted as quickly as his ponderous form would allow in pursuit of Miss Elizabeth.

The ballroom was large and already full of men and women in their finery. There was a cluster of red coated officers from the local

militia in one corner, with a bevy of young women in their ball gowns swarming around them like bees to honeysuckle.

A trio of musicians was setting up at one end of the large, vaulted room; the pianoforte and its master dominated the group, with a violinist and flutist standing nearby. It was not yet time for the music to start, which was well since Miss Elizabeth had disappeared into the crowd near the edge of the room next to the refreshments.

The clergyman took a few steps forward and craned his head. Miss Elizabeth was a petite woman and he still could not see her, but his eyes fell on the figure of a tall, handsome gentleman who was standing, looking haughty, near a spiky potted plant. Collins hesitated. He was quite certain he had not met the gentleman before, but somehow his bearing was that of the glorious and condescending Lady Catherine de Bourgh.

A moment later, the gentleman moved forward briskly and Collins watched him as he approached, yes, it was Miss Elizabeth! How delightful that Collins had found her! He walked with stately dignity toward the two and heard Miss Elizabeth state gravely, “Thank you, Mr. Darcy, my sister is indeed

much improved in health."

The beautiful second Bennet daughter turned toward the rector, her face calm, and he beamed at her. Mr. Collins had found Miss Elizabeth just in time, as the violinist was playing a few last practice notes and the various couples were making their way onto the dance floor. He held out an arm and captured his fair maiden. She really was such a delightful woman, Miss Elizabeth, and so very modest! Lady Catherine would be pleased.

They proceeded to the dance line and faced one another. The initial strains rang out and the dancing began, men and women twirling and stepping and bobbing in time with the music. Mr. Collins twirled and stepped and bobbed with the worst of them; he found himself in the wrong place much of the time. He had very little experience with dancing, unfortunately.

There was a sudden bump behind him from another gentleman, and he stepped forward hastily to get away, which entangled him in Miss Elizabeth's gown. She drew back a step quickly and he jerked his foot, but his heel caught in the fabric and he was falling backwards and …

Everything went black.

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Mr. Darcy was standing gloomily in the corner staring at the dancers when the catastrophe occurred. The object of his absurd obsession, Miss Elizabeth Bennet, had been dancing with a lumbering man, a clergyman based on his attire, who obviously had no business being on the dance floor. There was a sudden collision between the fool and Bingley, Miss Elizabeth jumped back and the idiotic clergyman fell down with the accompanying sound of ripping fabric.

There was a cry of distress from someone and Darcy rushed forward in horror. Miss Elizabeth!

He heaved a sigh of relief as he reached her side. She was well. The lace at the bottom of her gown had ripped, but she was still modestly attired and unharmed. Her dismayed gaze was on the individual lying supine on the floor, his eyes closed, a lock of lank hair in disarray across his forehead.

Darcy knelt down next to the man and gently shook his shoulder, but Eliza … Miss Elizabeth's partner did not move. Pemberley's master quickly touched the man's wrist and was relieved to find a pulse. He was not dead, at any rate.

"I say, Darcy, is he all right?" Bingley asked worriedly, kneeling down next to the recumbent form.

"He is alive, but he is unconscious. We had best get a couple of footmen to carry him upstairs to a bedroom, and you should send someone to fetch the local apothecary, Mr. Jones."

"I will do so, but perhaps we will need three footmen," Charles agreed. "He is a tall fellow."

He was also rather plump. The unknown individual was well fed for a member of the clergy.

Darcy rose to his feet and turned to face Miss Elizabeth, who was standing a few feet away, her lips parted in distress. At her right, her arm wrapped protectively around her, stood the handsome eldest Miss Bennet, whose face had lost much of its usual placidity.

"Is Mr. Collins all right?" Elizabeth

asked in concern.

"His pulse is strong, Miss Elizabeth, but he is unconscious."

"Oh dear! I do not know what happened!"

"Lizzy, what happened?" a new voice demanded.

Darcy sighed inwardly and turned toward the excitable, garrulous, and vulgar Mrs. Bennet, who was always loud and would no doubt be even louder in the midst of a crisis.

"Mr. Collins fell, Mama," Elizabeth explained in a repressive tone.

"Oh, dear me! Poor Mr. Collins! Will he not wake up?"

"He is unconscious, Mrs. Bennet," Darcy replied gravely. "The apothecary is being called."

"How could you have allowed him to fall, Lizzy?" Mrs. Bennet demanded irascibly. "How is he to make you an offer of marriage if he is unconscious?"

Darcy felt his heart lurch in his chest. Miss Elizabeth to be married to that ... that oaf?

“Mama, this is hardly the time to discuss such a matter,” the girl hissed indignantly.

“I believe that Mr. Collins and Mr. Bingley accidentally collided on the dance floor,” Darcy stated. “It was a mere accident.”

Elizabeth shot him a grateful look and Mrs. Bennet’s peevish expression relaxed.

“Perhaps he will die,” she mused aloud. “If he does, I wonder what will happen to the entail on Longbourn? Perhaps we will be able to keep our home when your father passes on, girls!”

“Mama!” Miss Bennet and Miss Elizabeth cried out together in embarrassed anguish.

Darcy decided to have mercy on them and retreat. Surely this Mr. Collins, presumably the heir to Longbourn, would wake up soon.

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“Mr. Collins is still unconscious this morning,” Bingley stated, taking a hasty sip of his coffee and grimacing as he scalded his throat. “Mr. Jones says he has sustained a concussion at the very least and must be kept

quiet."

To Darcy's considerable surprise, Miss Caroline Bingley was at the breakfast table. Miss Bingley was rarely up early, and given that she had been hostess to a large ball, it was even more surprising that she had risen from her bed at this hour.

"He should be sent back to Longbourn," she insisted, her lips tight. "Surely we have no obligation to care for yet another sickly Bennet."

"He is not a Bennet, Caroline," Bingley replied calmly. "He is their distant cousin and his name is Collins."

Caroline shook her head, "It matters not. He is a relation of the Bennet family and must return to Longbourn."

"And I say he cannot," her brother retorted. "Mr. Jones insists that he not be moved. He was injured during a ball held at Netherfield and I feel responsible, especially since I am the one who collided with him."

"He was out of position, Bingley, not you," Darcy pointed out mildly.

"Yes, it was the clergyman's fault!" Caroline agreed with a satisfied glance at Darcy. "Mr. Darcy agrees with me that you

have no responsibility for the man."

"I did not say I agree with that, Miss Bingley. I was merely making it clear that Bingley is not to blame. Given that he is unconscious and the apothecary says he cannot be moved, he should stay here at Netherfield."

Caroline bit her lip, her expression outraged, but fell silent.

"I had planned to go to London, today," Charles said cheerfully, "but given that we have an injured guest, I will stay home."

Chapter 2

"Mr. Darcy."

Darcy looked up in alarm from the book that he had been holding in his hands. Not that he was reading it. Because Miss Elizabeth's bright eyes and light figure had filled his mind and he was distracted from … from … a book on sheep diseases.

He grimaced wryly as he rose to his feet to greet Miss Bingley. No doubt Miss Elizabeth would be gratified to learn that the mere thought of her had distracted him from such a riveting topic.

Regrettably, this was one of the very few books on the shelves that he had not already read. Really, Bingley's library was a disgrace. If he was going to spend much more time at Netherfield, Darcy must acquire more books.

"Yes, Miss Bingley?" he asked of the lady in question, and then, upon observing her sister beside her, added, "Good morning, Mrs. Hurst."

Given that Mrs. Hurst was present, it was unlikely that Caroline Bingley was plotting to compromise him. That was all to

the good.

"We came to speak to you of Charles," Miss Bingley said, her eyes worried. "He is dangerously close to offering for Miss Bennet."

Darcy frowned in confusion, "You cannot know that, Miss Bingley. Your brother has shown considerable interest in other handsome, blonde ladies in the past, and has never made an offer."

Caroline Bingley shook her head, "It has gone farther than that, has it not, Louisa?"

"It has," her sister agreed. "Last night, Sir William Lucas announced loudly that there was a general expectation among the people of this pathetic town that Charles would make an offer to Miss Bennet. Surely you must have heard it."

"Mr. Darcy was arranging for the care of that clumsy parson after he tripped over Miss Elizabeth," Miss Bingley told her sister. "Really, these Bennets and their tiresome relations. You missed almost the entire ball, Mr. Darcy!"

"I thought it my duty," Darcy replied. In actual fact, he was not very fond of dancing and Bingley adored it, so he had thought it appropriate to arrange for the proper

disposition of Mr. Collins, thus allowing Bingley to return to the smiles of Miss Bennet. Darcy had considered asking Miss Elizabeth to dance but in retrospect, that would have been a poor idea. It was best not to give the young lady any hopes of winning the master of Pemberley.

"Mrs. Bennet said the same thing at dinner, that her insipid daughter would soon be mistress of Netherfield," Caroline Bingley added in outrage. "Really, these country folk! That is why I believe we must send Mr. Collins back to Longbourn as quickly as possible, and then convince Charles to leave Hertfordshire for London! Once he is back in Town, he will forget Miss Bennet, her degrading family, and indeed all the occupants of this miserable and lowly town! None of them are worthy of us!"

"There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus."

At these words, the threesome spun around in shock to find Mr. Collins standing at the door to the library, his face pale.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Collins?" Caroline Bingley demanded icily.

"We are all one in the eyes of God,"

Collins stated, his eyes odd, his posture uncertain.

"Mr. Collins," Darcy said, setting aside his astonishment in favor of concern, "you should not be out of bed. Please, do sit down."

Collins took a few wavering steps forward and Darcy grasped his arm and guided him to a nearby chair, where he collapsed more than sat.

"Er, thank you, Mr. …"

"Darcy," the gentleman replied, turning his gaze on Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst, "Perhaps one of you could summon Mr. Jones? I believe he should examine Mr. Collins."

Miss Bingley was still pink with outrage but with an explosive huff of her lips, and a shake of her skirts, she stalked out of the room with Mrs. Hurst close behind her.

"Where am I?" Collins asked plaintively.

"You are at Netherfield Hall, Mr. Collins," Darcy explained in a soothing tone, sinking down on a chair nearby. "You fell at the ball last night. Do you remember, sir?"

"I do not," the rector replied, his forehead scrunched in worry. "I do not remember."

“Well, that is perhaps not surprising,” Darcy said in what he hoped was a reassuring voice. “You hit your head quite hard.”

“You said your name is Mr. Darcy, sir?”

“Yes.”

“Mr. Darcy of Pemberley?”

Darcy felt his body go rigid with discomfort, “Yes, Mr. Collins.”

“I am the rector at Hunsford and your aunt, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, is my patroness.”

“I see,” Darcy commented grimly. Lady Catherine was an imperious woman with a very high opinion of herself, and she only hired those who venerated her obsequiously. Her underlings were almost uniformly tiresome.

The injured man sat back in the chair, his gaze fixed on the book of sheep diseases, which was bewildering. Why would a parson care about sheep?

“That verse you quoted?” Darcy asked curiously.

“Yes, sir? Galatians 3:28?”

The gentleman from Derbyshire blinked in surprise. “You know the Bible very well,

sir."

He was genuinely astonished at this. Many clergyman had only a passing knowledge of the Scriptures, and Lady Catherine seemed an unlikely patroness for a true scholar.

"I know it all, I think. Well, perhaps not the entire Old Testament, but the New, yes."

"What do you mean, you know it all, Mr. Collins?"

"I have it all in my head, sir," Collins explained calmly, tapping his skull with one long finger. "All of it."

"You mean you have memorized the entire New Testament?" Darcy demanded in disbelief. Nonsense!

"I believe so."

"The first chapter of John," Darcy prompted, reaching for a Bible and opening it to the appropriate page.

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God," Collins began, and proceeded to recite the entire chapter. When he had finished, Darcy closed his mouth with an astonished click.

"Word for word, Mr. Collins," he

breathed, more amazed than he had been in many a month, “and you truly know it all?”

“Yes.”

Darcy knew himself to be an intelligent man, but this was beyond belief, “How do you do it?”

Collins’s brown eyes shifted away from the book on the sheep diseases to focus on his face, “I was born with the curse, Mr. Darcy. I remember everything I read so long as I concentrate.”

“Curse? Why would you call it a curse? It is a blessing!”

The rather portly man shook his head and turned to gaze out the window of the library, “My father was illiterate, Mr. Darcy, and did not approve of a boy who loved books. I had my addiction of reading beaten out of me at a young age. I was permitted to read the Bible because Mr. Collins wished for me to be a clergyman, but little else was permitted. At Cambridge, I read enough to pass any exams and that was a delight, but my father …”

He trailed away, his face downcast, and Darcy was filled with a sudden, disgusted horror. His own father had loved books and

reading, and had inculcated that love in his son. To think of a man brutalizing his brilliant progeny over reading was beyond belief.

"I am sorry," he stated awkwardly, suddenly aware that this was an extraordinarily frank conversation between two men but newly met. "I hope you will feel free to read any book you like in this library, Mr. Collins, though there are not many books here. My friend Mr. Bingley is a very pleasant man, but not a great reader."

"Sheep diseases sound interesting."

"Do they?"

Again, that hungry gaze was turned upon him, "Everything is interesting, Mr. Darcy."

"Yes, I suppose it is."

Darcy stood up hesitantly. Collins seemed mostly rational but it seemed unwise to leave him alone.

"Your aunt, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, is very rude to those who are under her in position or rank, which is essentially everyone," Collins commented.

Darcy let out a startled gasp, followed by a chuckle, "That is true, Mr. Collins. I confess

that you are not entirely what I pictured when I imagined her latest clergyman."

"He is unconscious, or dead."

Darcy frowned in confusion, "Who is?"

The brown eyes turned upon him again, the man's expression remote. "Mr. Collins. The other Mr. Collins. This is who I truly am, but Mr. Collins has been in charge of my life for far too long.

Darcy felt his scalp creep with these words. It appeared that Mr. Collins was not, in fact, completely rational.

"Darcy, Mr. Collins!" Bingley cried out, stepping into the library with a footman at his heels, "How are you feeling, Mr. Collins?"

"Rather odd," the portly man replied, pushing himself cautiously to his feet. "May I return to my bed now?"

"Certainly," Bingley said heartily.

"May I borrow the book on sheep diseases?" Collins inquired piteously.

"Erm, yes?" Bingley agreed in a puzzled tone.

"Have you read Shakespeare?" Darcy asked gently.

“No, my father …”

“You should start with that and come back to sheep diseases at your leisure,” Darcy interrupted. “Come, I will carry the complete works up for you to read. You will enjoy it.”

A smile slowly spread across the parson’s homely face, “Yes, Mr. Darcy, I am sure I will.”

The footman held out an arm to the parson, who grasped it and began walking slowly out the door toward the stairwell.

Darcy, following behind with Bingley, opened his mouth to convey some of his remarkable conversation with Collins, but refrained from speaking when Bingley’s butler stepped into view.

“Miss Bennet and Miss Elizabeth Bennet have arrived and have asked to speak to you concerning Mr. Collins’s health. They are waiting in the sitting room, sirs.”

Bingley’s expression grew hopeful and Darcy spoke up quickly, “I will escort Mr. Collins upstairs, Bingley. Perhaps you can tell the Miss Bennets that Mr. Jones will be arriving shortly and will provide an update in time.”

“Yes, Darcy, thank you,” Bingley agreed

happily, his face turning yearningly toward the room where the lovely Miss Bennet waited.

Darcy frowned slightly at this. He had been largely indifferent to his friend's infatuation with Miss Bennet, but it was true that there seemed to be a deeper attraction to the young woman than usual. Perhaps Miss Bingley had a legitimate reason to be alarmed.

He walked behind the footman and Mr. Collins and he noted that the clergyman was limping slightly; his left foot seemed slightly impaired. On the second floor, Darcy was relieved to meet Mr. Jones, who had obviously just arrived.

"Mr. Jones. You made good time."

"I was already on my way to Netherfield to check on Mr. Collins, sir," the apothecary explained briskly. "It is very good to see you awake and walking about, Mr. Collins. How do you feel?"

Collins scowled and swayed slightly, "I feel rather odd, Mr. … Jones? I do not remember falling at the ball, and my head hurts."

"That is not surprising," the man assured his patient. "But come, let us get you to your

bedchamber where I can examine you."

Darcy found himself following along in their wake, his mind a whirl of confusion. What was happening with this man? Based on Darcy's knowledge of Lady Catherine, Mr. Collins could only be a weak minded man with a cringing and subservient disposition; his aunt required such behavior in those under her authority. But here was a man who spoke boldly and claimed to know the entire New Testament by heart.

It was bewildering and fascinating. It was also none of his business. Netherfield was Bingley's estate, not Darcy's, and Collins was a man of the lower classes, far too plebian to be of particular interest to a gentleman of Darcy's stature.

On the other hand …

No, he could not let it be. Collins was an enigma, and given that Darcy was here to advise his friend, it was legitimate that he take a close interest in the individual who was not only an unexpected guest, but his aunt's parson.

That was justification enough for Darcy to involve himself in this most bizarre of situations.

Chapter 3

Darcy lurked in an alcove across from Mr. Collins's bedchamber in Netherfield. He was curious to hear what Jones had to say about the injured man, and if he went downstairs he would be subjected either to Miss Bingley's complaining, or Miss Elizabeth's fine and tempting eyes, or both. It was best to stay here.

The door to the clergyman's room was firmly shut, so Darcy could only hear the soft rumblings of male voices. After some ten minutes, the door opened and Mr. Jones appeared with his black bag in his hand.

"By all means, read the Bard's works," he said cheerfully to the patient within, "but only for an hour at the most at a time, Mr. Collins. It is vital that you rest as much as possible to allow appropriate healing."

"Thank you, Mr. Jones."

Jones turned around and started slightly at the sight of Darcy, "Mr. Darcy?"

"Mr. Jones. How is Mr. Collins?"

Jones pulled the door shut firmly. "He is well, sir. I am very pleased to see him up and

walking around, though given his unsteadiness, it is unwise for him to descend the stairs without assistance."

"I will ask Mr. Bingley to have a footman stationed outside Mr. Collins's room to help him as needed," Darcy suggested.

The apothecary was clearly pleased. "That is an excellent idea. I am glad that he is being cared for so well."

"Did he say anything unusual?" Darcy inquired carefully.

Jones, an older man with a shock of silver hair, stopped in the middle of the corridor and looked up into Darcy's face, "Unusual? What do you mean?"

Darcy hesitated but decided, based on his minimal interactions with Mr. Jones, that the apothecary was a sensible man who could be trusted.

"Mr. Collins and I had a truly remarkable discussion in the library, and I found myself exceedingly surprised by two things. The first was that he dictated, word for word, the first chapter of the Gospel of John. The second was that he stated that 'the other Mr. Collins' was no longer in charge of his life. It was quite an extraordinary statement and I

find myself concerned for his mental state."

"That *is* remarkably odd. Interestingly, a few minutes ago, the rector quoted the entire first chapter of the book of James, which I found impressive, but I assumed it was merely a favorite of his as a clergyman."

"He claims to have memorized the entire New Testament, Mr. Jones."

The man's eyes flared wide, "Truly? That is incredible."

"It is, and I am inclined to believe him since I chose the chapter which he recited for me. The whole thing is extraordinary, and I find myself both curious and troubled."

"Are you concerned that he is mad?" Jones demanded bluntly.

Darcy hesitated and then slowly shook his head, "He seems rational enough, but I wonder whether he would be better served to stay here at Netherfield than to return to Longbourn, which has fewer servants and a … a livelier environment. Of course, he could potentially return home to Kent and his parsonage."

"There is no question of the latter," Jones insisted. "Mr. Collins lost consciousness for many hours and must not be moved far;

indeed, if Mr. Bingley is willing to host him here, I would advise he not move to Longbourn yet. He really ought not to be bumped about in even the most well sprung carriage."

"I agree," Darcy said with relief. He was fascinated by Mr. Collins. If the man truly could remember everything he read, then he was absolutely brilliant — but that brilliance was locked in the portly body of a formerly grovelling parson.

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"It is very kind of you to host Mr. Collins during his convalescence," Miss Bennet told Mr. Bingley, her soft blue eyes admiring.

"It is the least we can do," Bingley replied, his own eyes adoring. "After all, he was injured here at Netherfield."

A definite snort emanated from Miss Bingley, who was standing by the door, but neither Miss Bennet nor Mr. Bingley seemed to notice.

Miss Elizabeth clearly did notice as she shot a quick glance at Miss Bingley before

turning her attention back to Darcy, who was seated in the drawing room on an overstuffed chair. While he preferred firmer seats in general, it was wise to avoid a couch, since Miss Bingley would inevitably sit down next to him and move closer than propriety truly allowed.

"Miss Elizabeth," Darcy addressed her, "I remember that you enjoy reading?"

"Yes, I do."

"Is there a bookstore in Meryton?"

Elizabeth tilted her chin in her thoroughly enchanting manner. "Yes, Mr. Darcy, there is a very fine bookstore."

"Excellent. I will make a trip there soon in search of additional tomes for Bingley's rather bare shelves."

Bingley pulled his attention away from Miss Bennet long enough to chuckle, "I am no great reader, Darcy, as you well know. By all means, buy as many books as you like."

"Perhaps you ought to go with Mr. Darcy, Charles," Miss Bingley suggested from the couch nearest Darcy. "Netherfield's library is a true disgrace. A gentleman should always be working towards an extensive collection of books. There is nothing quite as enjoyable as a

good book, after all!"

"I agree, Miss Bingley," Elizabeth said brightly. "I am curious, what is a book you particularly enjoy?"

Caroline Bingley pursed her lips indignantly. "I enjoy many books, Miss Eliza," she claimed loftily, "but of course Shakespeare's works are some of my very favorites."

"Do you prefer the comedies, the tragedies, or the histories?" Elizabeth inquired courteously.

"Oh, the tragedies, of course! The pathos of Hamlet, the madness of Lady Macbeth, they are so inspiring to the true patron of the arts!"

"I prefer the comedies," Jane Bennet commented cheerfully. "I know the tragedies are clever and creative, but they are so gloomy. I like happier plays."

"I do as well, Miss Bennet," Bingley agreed.

"Which play would you suggest I read first, Mr. Darcy?"

Darcy leaped to his feet in surprise. Mr. Collins was standing in the doorway of the drawing room with a wooden faced footman

at his side.

"Mr. Collins! You really ought not to be out of bed, sir," he exclaimed.

"I had to see you, Mr. Darcy," Collins averred, his expression passionate. "Shakespeare's works are so extensive and so powerful, but it will take much time to read it all, and there is never enough time to read. Never enough."

Bingley and the two Bennet women seemed thoroughly startled while Miss Bingley looked disgusted.

"Mr. Collins, please do sit down," Darcy suggested soothingly, gesturing toward the chair he had just vacated. "Miss Bingley, I wonder if you could arrange to have some tea sent in for Mr. Collins?"

"Certainly, Mr. Darcy," she simpered, leaving with alacrity. Darcy hoped she would not return.

"Mr. Darcy, which is your favorite Shakespearean play?" Collins asked in a single minded way.

"Oddly enough, I enjoy the histories most, Mr. Collins, but I would suggest *The Tempest* as a good introduction to Shakespeare."

“Oh, I love *The Tempest*,” Jane Bennet exclaimed. “I saw the play in London with my aunt and uncle.”

“Miss Bennet!” Mr. Collins exclaimed. “Miss Elizabeth! I did not see you here. Why are you here at Netherfield?”

The Bennet women exchanged surprised glances and Elizabeth spoke for both of them, “We came to see how you are doing, Mr. Collins. We are relieved that you are feeling better after your fall.”

“Er, yes, well, that is to say, I did not feel anything when I was unconscious, and now my head hurts, so I am not certain that I feel better, precisely.”

Miss Elizabeth looked bewildered, as she well might.

“I believe,” Darcy observed gently, “that Miss Elizabeth is pleased that you have regained consciousness.”

“Yes, that is a good thing,” Collins agreed, his face screwed up in profound concentration. He gazed at Miss Elizabeth for a minute.

“You would regret accepting my hand in marriage, Miss Elizabeth,” he said conversationally.

Bingley choked aloud at this statement and Elizabeth Bennet flushed indignantly.

"I assure you, Mr. Collins, that I have no intention of accepting any offer from you."

The rector looked startled. "Truly? Even though I am heir to Longbourn? Even though your portion is very small?"

Now Elizabeth's eyes were narrow with outrage. "I assure you that I would never accept you."

Collins heaved a great sigh of relief, "That is truly excellent, Cousin. You are most wise. You are a lively and intelligent woman, and would loathe being under the authority of Lady Catherine de Bourgh, who is a termagant."

There was another gasp, this one from Miss Bennet, and Elizabeth turned a wide-eyed stare at Mr. Darcy.

"Mr. Collins," the man said mildly, "while it is true that my aunt is an arrogant woman, it is not politic to discuss that widely with those who do not know her personally."

The rector frowned and raised a wavering hand to his brow, "My apologies, Mr. Darcy. You are correct. My apologies, Miss Elizabeth, Miss Bennet, Mr. Bingley."

Miss Elizabeth's gaze was fixed on Darcy now, confusion written across her brow.

"I believe that Mr. Collins is somewhat discombobulated after his fall last night," Darcy explained carefully.

Miss Bennet's mouth formed an understanding "O", and Elizabeth turned a frowning glance on Mr. Collins.

"You truly do not intend to offer for me, Mr. Collins?" she asked boldly.

Collins shook his head, "No, Miss Elizabeth. I intended to before my injury, of course, but I have awakened and now see the light. I truly do not know of any woman who would relish dealing with Lady Catherine on a frequent basis, but you are an especially intelligent and independent gentlewoman, and you would find my patroness extremely tedious. For that matter, Mr. Collins is hardly a catch, in spite of the fact that he is the heir to Longbourn."

Elizabeth coughed, "Mr. Collins?"

"The other Mr. Collins, yes."

"Sir," Darcy interpolated hastily, "I really believe you must return to your bed. Mr. Jones was quite firm that you need rest. I intend to travel to the bookstore in Meryton

soon and would be delighted to pick up a few books for you. Are there any topics you find of particular interest?"

"Oh, Mr. Darcy," the man beamed, "that is an impossible question to answer. Anything at all is of interest, though I particularly enjoy histories."

"Perhaps I can find a copy of Southey's *Life of Nelson*," Darcy suggested.

"That is an excellent book," Elizabeth Bennet agreed, though her brow was still wrinkled in confusion.

"You are most gracious, sir, most gracious indeed. I will return to my bed and my Shakespeare."

"You might well enjoy *Julius Caesar* and *Richard III* since you enjoy histories," Darcy declared, "but do get adequate rest."

"Thank you," the man replied, climbing to his feet with some difficulty and limping to the door where the footman still stood.

Bingley waited until the rector had departed before turning to Darcy with concern writ large across his face, "I say, Darcy, is the man quite all right?"

Pemberley's master, who was gazing

blankly toward the door, turned toward his closest friend, “I do not think he is precisely all right, no. Mr. Jones thinks that he has sustained a brain injury.”

Bingley looked even more alarmed at this, “Is he … quite safe? My sisters are here in the house.”

Darcy sighed, “I do not believe Mr. Collins is violent in the least. He is more likely to be a danger to himself than anything else; he is slightly addled and limping and might well fall on the stairs, which is why I asked you to assign a footman to his door.”

“What do you suppose he meant about ‘the other Mr. Collins’?” Elizabeth asked carefully.

Darcy hesitated. That statement was truly bizarre and perhaps indicative of insanity, but then …

“Were you acquainted with Mr. Collins’s father?” he asked the Bennet ladies.

Jane and Elizabeth glanced at one another and shook their heads simultaneously.

“Our father quarreled with his,” Elizabeth explained gravely. “According to Mr. Bennet, the elder Mr. Collins was a cruel, illiterate, unpleasant man.”

“Less than two hours ago, Mr. Collins informed me that his father hated learning and beat his son’s love for books out of him.”

Jane Bennet gasped in distress, “That is horrible, Mr. Darcy, absolutely horrible!”

“It is,” Darcy agreed with a noticeable shudder, “It is hard to fathom a father so cruel as to punish his son for his natural love of learning. I am not a medical man, but it seems that your cousin’s fall has, fortuitously enough, freed him from some of the mental chains of his father’s cruelty. It is clear that Mr. Collins has a passion for knowledge. Furthermore, your cousin tells me that he has an amazing ability to remember what he reads and that he has memorized the entire New Testament of the Holy Bible. I tested him by requesting that he recite the entire first chapter of the gospel of John and he did so without hesitation, and without a single error.”

Miss Elizabeth gasped, “Mr. Collins? The entire New Testament? How could that be?”

“I believe,” Darcy mused aloud, “that your cousin is a genius.”

Chapter 4

"What are we planning to tell Mother?" Jane inquired as the Bennet carriage rattled its way back toward Longbourn.

Elizabeth was looking out the carriage window but her mind was fixated on their remarkable visit to Netherfield.

"I am sorry, Jane. What did you say?"

"What will we tell Mother about Mr. Collins? She was insistent that he return home since, as we both know, she wishes him to marry you."

"I am saved from that horrifying fate, anyway. I would have refused him, but Mama would have berated me for days, I daresay. As to what we will say now, that is simple enough. Mr. Jones examined our cousin and said that Mr. Collins sustained a head injury and thus must not be jostled about in a carriage. Mr. Bingley kindly offered to host him as long as necessary."

Jane nodded in relief at this. It was a reasonable enough explanation, and Mrs. Bennet, who never lost sight of a potential

matrimonial partner, would doubtless send them frequently to Netherfield to obtain updates on their cousin's progress. Jane would not mind that since it meant more time with Mr. Bingley.

"What do you think of that extraordinary information about Mr. Collins?" she asked Elizabeth timidly. Jane was always inclined to think the best of people, but she wondered if their unctuous cousin was quite mad.

Elizabeth stirred restlessly in her seat, "While I am completely bewildered by Mr. Collins, I confess that I am more focused on the extraordinary behavior of Mr. Darcy."

"Mr. Darcy? I thought he was kind, attentive, and sympathetic to Mr. Collins."

Elizabeth turned to face her favorite sister. "Yes, he was, Jane. He was all of those things. Here is a man who is haughty and arrogant and rude, and yet he was kind and gentle with our possibly insane cousin. How can that be?"

Jane frowned, "Do you wish Mr. Darcy to be unkind to poor Mr. Collins?"

"Of course not, Jane. I merely do not understand the man. He has no responsibility

towards Mr. Collins; indeed, our cousin is a lowly clergyman with deficient connections. And yet, the highborn master of Pemberley was considerate and understanding with our injured cousin and offered him advice on reading material. He even intends to purchase books for Mr. Collins's reading pleasure. When I think of how Mr. Darcy persecuted Lieutenant George Wickham over the matter of the church living, it makes no sense at all! Mr. Wickham was his father's godson and the living was destined for him, and yet Mr. Darcy set aside his own father's desire. Mr. Collins is only his imperious aunt's rector, and quite unworthy of his notice!"

Jane sighed, "You know my opinion of the matter."

"I do, dearest sister. You believe that there was some great confusion and that both Mr. Wickham and Mr. Darcy are in the right. Well, that will not do, Jane. They cannot both be blameless."

"Then perhaps," her sister replied, though diffidently, "you should consider whether Mr. Wickham might be the one at fault."

Elizabeth knitted her brows in

astonishment, “What *can* you mean, Jane?”

Her sister blushed and looked down at the floor of the carriage, “Lizzy, you know I do try to think the best of everyone, but it really was not … not kind of Mr. Wickham to tell you such dreadful things about Mr. Darcy when you were so newly acquainted. It shows a sad want of delicacy on the lieutenant’s part.”

“Oh, but,” Elizabeth cried out, and then stopped. It was true that Mr. Wickham had only just met her when he told his extraordinary story of Mr. Darcy’s cruelty toward him.

“Perhaps Mr. Wickham merely wished to warn us?” she mused unhappily.

“Warn us of what?” Jane demanded. “Did he indicate that Mr. Darcy is a danger to young ladies in some way?”

“No,” Elizabeth admitted. “He merely stated that Mr. Darcy is arrogant and proud and rude, which I knew already, and told me the story of the stolen living.”

Jane looked as disapproving as she was capable of, but remained silent.

Elizabeth sighed, “You are correct. Mr. Wickham should not have spoken so to me.”

“He should not,” her sister replied quietly. “It is possible that he is so devastated over the loss of the living that it leaves him intemperate, but I do urge you, Lizzy, to keep an open mind. Mr. Bingley is such a good man. I do not see how he could be close friends to an unprincipled individual who would callously set aside the ardent wishes of his own father.”

Elizabeth Bennet sighed, “You have given me much to think of, Jane.”

“Good, and now I will give you more to think of. We must tell Father something about Mr. Collins, surely?”

“Yes, we must.”

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Mr. James Bennet lifted his head from his book and gazed warily at his two eldest daughters.

“Well, my dears? I assume Mr. Collins is once more in our company, intent on proclaiming the glories of Lady Catherine de Bourgh?”

Jane and Elizabeth exchanged troubled

glances.

"No, Father," his second-born informed him. "Mr. Collins is at Netherfield and will remain there for at least another day."

"Is he still unconscious?" Mr. Bennet inquired with concern.

"No, he regained consciousness," Lizzy explained, "but he is quite altered. His personality seems almost entirely different."

"Altered in what way?"

"His demeanor," Jane mused. "His speech patterns …"

"His words," Elizabeth chimed in. "He informed me that he would not be offering for my hand because I am an independent woman and would thus despise being under the authority of Lady Catherine, whom he described as a termagant."

Longbourn's master sputtered in astonishment, "A termagant? That is an enormous change given his previous addiction to praising the lady to the skies."

Elizabeth continued determinedly, "Mr. Collins also, according to Mr. Darcy, recited an entire chapter of the gospel of John word for word with ease, and claims to remember

everything that he reads. Mr. Darcy thinks that he is a very intelligent man whose phenomenal abilities were suppressed by his tyrannical father's abuse."

"Mr. Collins, intelligent?" Bennet protested. "Surely we are not speaking of the same man! Our cousin is many things, but intelligent is not one of them."

"He is very altered, Father," Jane said quietly. "I think perhaps you should visit him and see for yourself."

Mr. Bennet sighed deeply and glanced outside. It was a pleasant day for late November, but chilly, and he was very cozy and comfortable in his warm library.

"I will go visit him tomorrow morning, my dears," he promised. "It may well be that Mr. Collins is merely addled from his fall, and by tomorrow he will be entirely back to his normal absurd self."

"When you do, perhaps you could bring a few history books for him," Elizabeth suggested dryly. "He claims to be very interested in such topics."

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Once Jane and Elizabeth had departed the library, Jane went upstairs to refresh herself and Elizabeth walked to the front sitting room where, to her surprise, she found the militia officers Mr. Wickham, Mr. Denny and Mr. Pratt being entertained by her mother and two youngest sisters.

"Oh, Lizzy," Mrs. Bennet cried. "There you are! I thought you should never return from Netherfield though it is quite all right that you stayed for a time. Did Mr. Bingley and Jane have a pleasant talk?"

"Yes, Mother, they did," Elizabeth assured her mother, even as her eyes lit up at the sight of the handsome lieutenant, Mr. Wickham. "It is delightful to see you, sirs."

All three men bowed and Mr. Wickham smiled at her, "It is most pleasant to see you, Miss Elizabeth. We were overjoyed to meet your youngest sisters in Meryton this morning, and honored when they invited us home to meet your eminent parents."

"Mr. Bennet, of course, only stayed for a few minutes to converse," Mrs. Bennet said pettishly. "It is very hard to pull that man away from his library for long."

“Ah, but reading is the mark of an intelligent man, is it not?” Mr. Wickham commented winsomely. “I know that Miss Elizabeth is a great reader, is she not?”

Elizabeth chuckled, “I would not say that I am a great reader, sir, but I certainly enjoy it very much. What kind of books are you partial to, sir?”

“Well, as to that, I must confess I am *not* a great reader,” Mr. Wickham returned with a gleam of his white, even teeth. “Perhaps I would have been more interested in such things, but my patron’s son wished to earn his father’s approval by focusing on such pursuits. I did not care to provide any sort of competition since the elder Mr. Darcy was prone to prefer me as it was.”

Elizabeth blinked in astonishment at these words as Lydia, her youngest sister, cried out indignantly, “Mr. Darcy is such a rude, jealous man! First he insulted Lizzy at an assembly, and now we know that he cruelly deprived you of the living which your godfather wished for you.”

Wickham shook his head sorrowfully, “The elder Mr. Darcy would be most distressed at what his son has become, but come, let us

change the subject to more cheerful topics. I hope you all had a pleasant time at the ball last night?"

"Oh yes," Lydia cried out exuberantly. "I danced every dance, though I wish I could have danced with you, Mr. Wickham."

"Well, I for one am pleased that he did not attend," Denny commented with a sly glance at Wickham. "If he had, I daresay many of us lesser mortals would have been deprived of the pleasure of partnering you in a dance, Miss Lydia."

Lydia, always susceptible to open flattery, lifted her chin saucily and replied in kind, and the conversation grew general.

Elizabeth, who had seated herself on the blue couch on the south wall, turned her attention to Mr. Wickham as he settled down near her.

"I do regret that I was unable to dance with you last night, Miss Elizabeth," the man said gravely. "I found as the time grew near that I had better not meet Mr. Darcy; that to be in the same room, the same party with him for so many hours together, might be more than I could bear, and that scenes might arise unpleasant to more than myself."

Elizabeth stared at the lieutenant, a stray thought niggling in the back of her mind. Had not Wickham insisted that he had no reason to avoid Mr. Darcy? That as he was the injured party, it was for Darcy to stay away if he wished?

"Is something wrong?" Wickham inquired, his tone concerned, his handsome face gentle.

Elizabeth shook her head, "Not at all, Mr. Wickham. I am sorry you were not at the ball. As a matter of fact, Mr. Darcy was not much in evidence so it is unlikely you would have interacted."

"Ah, so he hid himself away? That is not surprising to me; his great pride will not permit him to converse and dance with those he considers below him, which is almost everyone."

"In truth, he was caring for Mr. Collins."

"Mr. Collins? Your cousin, the clergyman?"

"Yes. Did not my younger sisters tell you? Mr. Collins tripped during the first dance, struck his head on the floor, and lost consciousness. Mr. Darcy arranged for his care while the ball continued. It was kind of Mr.

Darcy to assist."

"No, your sisters did not mention Mr. Collins's accident," Wickham replied, looking slightly uncomfortable for a moment. "But wait, your cousin is Darcy's aunt's rector, is he not?"

"That is true."

"Well, that accounts for it, I am certain. Darcy is very desirous of pleasing his aunt in order to facilitate his eventual marriage to Miss de Bourgh. I am certain Lady Catherine will be exceptionally pleased to learn that her nephew assisted her clergyman."

"Perhaps," Elizabeth agreed noncommittally. "But let us speak of something else. How was your trip to Town yesterday?"

"It was pleasant enough, though it was a delight to return to Meryton. London, while always an exciting place, pales compared to the delights of excellent society I have found here."

Chapter 5

"Ah, good morning, Mr. Darcy," Mr. Collins said, wrenching his attention from the fat tome of Shakespeare's works in his hands.

"Good morning, Mr. Collins," Darcy replied with a mixture of unease and rabid curiosity. "I hope that you are feeling better today?"

Collins frowned thoughtfully, "Yes, better. My head still hurts, as does my ankle, but the degree of discomfort has diminished. I am grateful for that. I confess to being displeased with this library, sir. It is pathetic."

Darcy pursed his lips to prevent a smile. He was also entirely unimpressed with the library at Netherfield, but of course he did not share his disparaging thoughts with Bingley. Thankfully, his friend was pottering about in the drawing room after a late and leisurely breakfast and thus was not available to hear the disgust in the parson's tone.

"Yes, my friend Bingley is not a great reader," Darcy agreed. "Not that he despises reading or readers. He simply has other interests. I do intend to travel to Meryton

tomorrow morning in search of additional works."

"Excellent! I wonder if you might be willing to search for any contemporary histories of Richard III. I am most curious as to the truth behind the man, so to speak."

Darcy lifted surprised eyebrows, "A rather depressing focus of your curiosity, surely? Richard III is rightly reviled for the murder of his own nephews so that he could snatch the throne from his brother's eldest son, Edward V."

Collins leaned back in his chair and shook his head, "I rather doubt that Richard was responsible for the disappearance of the two princes in the Tower of London, Mr. Darcy. It no doubt makes a good play, and of course Shakespeare was writing under a Tudor queen, but I think it quite likely that Queen Elizabeth's grandfather, Henry VII, actually murdered the boys."

Darcy gazed blankly at the rector and shook his head to clear it, "What?"

The clergyman sighed, "I studied Henry VII while at Cambridge, Mr. Darcy. He made quite a point of imprisoning and killing all the possible heirs to Edward IV, Richard's brother

and the former king. Again, Shakespeare's play is a brilliant one, and very powerful, but I doubt it has much to do with the actual history of the matter."

Pemberley's master frowned intensely, seeking buried information in the recesses of his mind, "Thomas More, who was martyred under Henry VIII, wrote a book about Richard III, I believe. It was that book which was the basis of Shakespeare's play. More was, by all accounts, an honorable man."

"More was also, let me see … he was five years of age when Richard III ascended to the throne, and only eight when Henry VII killed Richard and took the English throne. He was a child, sir. More's history of Richard III was no doubt molded by the information meted out by the Tudor kings who succeeded Richard."

Darcy worked to keep his mouth from hanging open, "How can you possibly know More's age at the time of Richard's reign?"

"I can do sums," the other man pointed out in bewilderment. "It is hardly a difficult thing when one knows the years spanning a man's life and death."

"But how do you know the years?"

“As I said, Mr. Darcy, I read up on Henry VII and his various contemporaries while at Cambridge for research …”

The man’s face suddenly grew blank and his eyes piteous. “You will not tell Mr. Collins, I hope? Please?”

“Mr. Collins?” Darcy asked worriedly. “Which Mr. Collins?”

“My father,” Collins replied, seeming to shrink into himself. “He … he hates that I read, that I learn. He will, he will …”

“He will do nothing,” a new voice announced from just inside the library door. “Your father died several years ago, Cousin. You do not need to be alarmed.”

Collins jerked in surprise and turned, “Cousin Bennet! I did not see you there.”

“My apologies, Mr. Collins, Mr. Darcy. I was going to announce myself, but your discussion was of such interest that I listened for a few minutes.”

Darcy did not pretend to be astute at analyzing the expression of his fellow human beings, but he could see, in the slightly dilated eyes of Mr. Bennet, that the man was totally flummoxed.

“Do you have any histories of Richard III in your library?” Collins demanded, his countenance shifting from alarmed to obsessed in a moment.

“I do not believe I do, Cousin,” Bennet replied solemnly. “I have some more general histories, but not a specific biography of the man.”

“Disappointing,” Collins replied, turning his attention back to the book in his hands.

“Sir?”

All three men turned toward the door, where a maid stood inside, “Mr. Collins, Mr. Jones is here to examine you, sir.”

“I am reading,” Collins pointed out indignantly.

“You can read later,” Darcy proposed in a soothing tone. “Come, Mr. Collins, you must let the apothecary examine you. After that, you can read.”

“Very well,” the man murmured sadly, struggling to his feet. Darcy followed him out of the room, ensuring that he was assigned to a footman standing nearby. Given Collins’s lack of focus, it was entirely possible the clergyman would wander off to the kitchens unless guided back to his bedroom.

When Darcy returned to the library, he found Miss Elizabeth's father seated in a chair by the fire, his expression dazed.

"I presume that you are as startled as I am at your cousin's demeanor?" he asked the older man.

"More so, Mr. Darcy, more so. I doubt you even met Mr. Collins before his injury; let me assure you that my cousin used to be an obsequious, toadying, fawning, sycophantic, absurdity of a man. This man, well, his appearance and voice are the same, but I assure you that save for that, I would think him an entirely different individual."

Darcy took a seat across from Mr. Bennet, "I did not know Mr. Collins before his fall, but I know my aunt, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, very well indeed. She allows only one kind of man to serve as rector of Hunsford. A brilliant, blunt man like Collins is the last man on earth she would appoint to that office. So I am quite aware he is much changed."

"Elizabeth and Jane told me of his alteration and used the word 'brilliant' about Collins, but I confess I laughed it off. I thought him a complete fool, to be truthful. I am amazed, sir."

“I am as well,” Darcy agreed, shaking his head in wonder. “It would be startling enough for Collins to remember what he reads with such incredible ease, but it is more than that; he is clearly able to pull disparate pieces of information from his reading and come to a reasonable conclusion, or at least a reasonable argument. I admit it is hard for me to believe that Richard III is innocent of the murders of his nephews, but Collins provided sufficient data to provoke some doubt on the matter. Not that it is of vital concern what happened to a king hundreds of years ago, but Mr. Collins’s scholarly ability cannot be denied.”

Bennet sighed ruefully, “I agree. It is ironic that now that he might be a worthy son-in-law, he is apparently determined not to marry my Lizzy, or at least so she informed me.”

Darcy’s chest thumped oddly at these words. It hardly mattered whom Miss Elizabeth married. She must marry someone, after all, or face poverty. But … but ...

“Your Miss Elizabeth is most intriguing,” he stated, earning a puzzled look from Mr. Bennet.

Clearing his throat, Darcy changed the

subject, “To be clear, sir, Mr. Collins merely stated that he would not offer for your second daughter because Miss Elizabeth would intensely dislike being under the direction of Lady Catherine. I cannot argue with that conclusion, sir. It would take either a supremely submissive or supremely practical woman to survive under my aunt’s haughty authority. She is not a gracious or kindly woman, my aunt.”

Bennet stared out the window for a long moment before replying, “How do you suppose Lady Catherine will respond to Mr. Collins’s change of demeanor, assuming that his current persona remains in force?”

Darcy compressed his lips, “She will not be pleased at all, sir.”

Bennet sighed, “At any rate, she cannot dislodge him from Hunsford. The living is a lifetime appointment.”

“Yes …”

“You are uneasy, Mr. Darcy? May I ask why?”

“Mr. Collins speaks of another Mr. Collins at times.”

“His father?”

“No, himself. His ‘other self’. If my aunt were sufficiently determined, she might be able to have him committed to Bedlam if, that is, Mr. Collins continues to speak in such an odd way. Lady Catherine is sister to an earl, and the Matlocks have great influence.”

“But you do not believe him insane, do you, Mr. Darcy?”

“I do not. I believe him to be an absolutely brilliant man who was abused by his father and by necessity submerged his genius. But I assure you that my aunt will have no appreciation for such a thing.”

Bennet bit his lip, “I confess to no great attachment to Mr. Collins, but I would not care to see him in Bedlam.”

“No, sir,” Darcy agreed. “It would be cruel and dreadful.”

Chapter 6

November 29th, 1812

Dear Lady Catherine,

I trust that this letter finds you and Cousin Anne well.

For the last six weeks, I have been residing with my friend Mr. Bingley at Netherfield Park, an estate in Hertfordshire.

Two days ago, Mr. Bingley hosted a ball. During the first dance, a clergyman named Mr. Collins fell and struck his head, rendering him unconscious. I discovered, to my surprise, that you recently provided Mr. Collins with the living at Hunsford and thus he is your rector.

While Mr. Collins has regained consciousness, he sustained a mild brain injury from his fall. He is currently under the care of a local apothecary who states that he is not well enough to travel back to Kent. Thus, he must stay in Hertfordshire for at least a few more days.

I hope and trust that you will manage the necessary arrangements in your parish; indeed I have no concerns, knowing that you more than anyone else can arrange for the proper care of the

families in your community.

Respectfully,

Fitzwilliam Darcy

Darcy read over the letter once again, and, certain that he had provided enough subtle flattery, sealed and addressed it. It was appropriate to send information about Mr. Collins's situation to his autocratic aunt, but he did not wish for Lady Catherine to become involved in the man's care. Given the clergyman's fragile mental state, it was advisable that he stay far away from his haughty patroness. She was all too likely to attempt to scold him into good health and humor, which was absurd.

Really, in her own autocratic way, Lady Catherine *was* absurd.

He walked out of his sitting room and down the stairs; the butler accepted his letter with a gracious nod of the head and the assurance that the letter would be sent out that day.

It was ten in the morning and Darcy trusted Bingley would be ready for a trip to Meryton. They had agreed to visit the bookstore together; Darcy, because he loved

books and wished to feed the bibliographic yearnings of both himself and Mr. Collins, and Bingley because he enjoyed a good ride on a good horse on a decent November day.

Darcy passed Mr. Collins in the hall; the latter was making his way toward the library with a determined expression. A footman was walking behind the rector ensuring that he came to no harm.

There were raised voices in the drawing room, one of them Miss Caroline Bingley's, and Darcy entered the room with caution.

"I absolutely insist that he leave, Charles!" the lady cried out, her face roughly the color of a semi-ripe tomato. "How can you even think of allowing such a man to stay here in my home? He insulted me most vilely!"

"Mr. Collins is ill, Caroline," Bingley replied, his expression a mixture of amusement and sympathy. "You must not take his words too much to heart. Oh, Darcy, there you are."

Darcy cringed inwardly as he stepped forward boldly, "Good morning, Bingley, Miss Bingley."

"He must return to Longbourn!" Miss Bingley fumed, clearly too distracted to greet

Darcy with her typical coquettish enthusiasm.

"May I ask what has occurred?" Darcy inquired with trepidation.

"That wretched clergyman called me a … a ... swine!" Miss Bingley snarled, her already pink face reddening further. "A swine!"

"Now Caroline," Bingley said in a soothing tone, though his friend could tell he was swallowing a smile, "I do not think that is entirely what he meant. He said something about a fair woman and he was clearly referring to you. He clearly was making an obscure parallel ..."

"Between me and a pig, yes!" the woman shrieked loudly, her eyes flashing in outrage. "Charles, I insist that you send him away. I will not stay in a house where I am insulted by such a lout!"

Darcy shook his head in dismay, "Indeed, Miss Bingley, I do regret that you experienced such discourtesy. It is not fair for you to be exposed to such unkindness in your own home. I do not believe Mr. Collins is deliberately being rude, but he is somewhat addled."

"There, you see, Charles! Mr. Darcy

agrees with me!"

"You are right that Mr. Collins should not stay here any longer," Darcy said gravely, provoking a delighted smile from his friend's sister. "You must be protected from further indignities. I will escort Mr. Collins to London this afternoon. He can stay with me in my London home. It would probably be best if he was seen by my physician …"

"Leave?!" Caroline interrupted, her blue eyes wide with horror. "No, Mr. Darcy, no! I did not mean … Mr. Collins is not your responsibility, sir, but the Bennets! He must go to Longbourn!"

Pemberley's master shook his head decidedly, "It will not do. Longbourn is a smaller home with a large family already in residence. They do not have the servants or room to care for Mr. Collins adequately."

"But why should you be responsible for such a man? He is only a clergyman, after all! You are a noble gentleman, the master of a great estate. He is not worthy of your notice, Mr. Darcy."

This was said with such confidence that Darcy felt his heart quail within him. Is that what Miss Bingley truly thought of him, that

he was so caught up in his own pride and position that he was indifferent to the needs of those inhabiting the lower classes?

"Lady Catherine de Bourgh, my aunt who lives in Kent, installed Mr. Collins as rector of the parish under her care, Miss Bingley. I do have a responsibility for the man."

The woman blinked at him in astonishment but responded swiftly to mitigate the damage, "Mr. Darcy, I do apologize for my outburst. Of course Mr. Collins can stay. As you say, the poor man is confused from his brain injury. I am quite at peace with his presence, I assure you."

Darcy could not resist, "Are you quite certain, Miss Bingley? I can easily take him away …"

"No, no," she responded firmly, a saccharine smile plastered on her face. "He must stay. I insist!"'

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"What exactly did Mr. Collins say to your sister?" Darcy demanded as their horses

walked briskly out of Netherfield's main gate onto the road which led toward Meryton.

Bingley, who had obviously been swallowing his merriment, let forth a guffaw of laughter at this query.

"That is a good question, Darcy," he replied when he had recovered himself. "But first, I must set the stage, if I may. Caroline accosted me in the drawing room after breakfast and began complaining bitterly — about the weather, about the cook here at Netherfield, about the dullness of the countryside, about the local society in general and the Bennets in particular. Regrettably, she has taken a strong dislike to Miss Elizabeth, though I do not know why. In any case, she was whining vociferously when Mr. Collins unexpectedly walked into the room. For such a big man, he is surprisingly light on his feet, though Caroline's strident voice was loud enough to drown out a cavalry charge. He strode into the room, fixed her with his somewhat beady eyes, and quoted …"

Bingley screwed up his forehead, "'As a jewel of gold in a swine's snout, so is a fair woman without discretion.' I do not know exactly where that comes from, but it was entirely apropos."

Darcy laughed, “Perhaps the Bible? I do not recognize it, but the Scriptures seem to be Mr. Collins’s favorite point of reference.”

“Which is entirely appropriate given his profession,” Bingley agreed jovially. “I suppose I ought to be horrified that my own sister was so roundly insulted, but I find I am not. To be sure, Caroline had it coming.”

“Mr. Collins certainly has a penchant for speaking the bald truth,” Darcy agreed, his amusement shifting to gratitude. “I appreciate your acceptance of such a man in your household, Bingley.”

“Nonsense, Darcy,” Bingley said cheerfully. “The poor man was injured in my house and he is a harmless enough fellow, not to mention I relish the sheer entertainment value of his straightforward speeches. I would not dream of sending him away. If I am very fortunate, his presence plus Caroline’s disgust with Hertfordshire will cause my dear sisters to depart for London. I would no longer have a hostess, of course, but I believe I would be happy to forego entertaining if I did not need to listen to Caroline and Louisa complain.”

“Are you quite happy here, Bingley?”

“I am very happy. I hope you are as

well?"

Darcy gazed around thoughtfully. Late November was not the best time to admire the Hertfordshire countryside but it was a splendid place with its soft and rolling hills and its great stands of ancient trees.

"I am happy, yes. I prefer the country to Town, though I admit I would not have thought you as pleased as I to eschew the society of London."

Bingley patted his horse's neck affectionately, "I am not like my sisters, Darcy. I do enjoy London parties and balls, but I also enjoy smaller affairs, and the companionship of so called simpler people who are often far more charitable than the members of the *haut ton*. I am very attracted to Miss Bennet, as you know, and my attraction is due to more than just her great beauty. She is a very kind person, Darcy. She never makes sarcastic remarks about others; indeed, her speech is always generous. In fact, I have found that as my appreciation for her personality has grown, my opinion of her beauty has grown in equal measure."

Darcy shook his head slightly, "I hope you will not take this amiss, Bingley. I agree

that Miss Bennet is a charming and beautiful woman, but I do not think she is in love with you."

"Do you not?" Bingley asked worriedly, his face turning toward his friend. "She seems to like me well enough."

"She may like you, my friend, but surely you wish for more than mere liking from a wife?"

Bingley frowned, "If she does not love me, she will not accept my offer, surely."

"It is almost certain she will accept your offer," Darcy insisted. "Mrs. Bennet clearly is desirous of marrying her daughters off as quickly as possible. You, with your great wealth, must seem like a plum ready to be plucked. Longbourn is entailed, you know."

"To Mr. Collins," Bingley countered shrewdly, "and Miss Elizabeth was extremely clear that she would not accept an offer from Mr. Collins in spite of the entail. I believe Miss Bennet to be a very honest woman; if I decide to offer for her, I will be certain of her true feelings. In any case, it is of no account now. I am not planning to offer for her immediately."

Darcy said nothing more. It seemed that Miss Bingley was right about that, at least; her

brother believed himself in love with Miss Jane Bennet. On the other hand, Bingley had fallen in and out of love before; truly, so long as his friend did not make a hasty decision, all would be well.

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"I will have the volumes packed up carefully and brought to Netherfield by this evening, Mr. Darcy," the owner of the book store assured him warmly.

Darcy nodded with pleasure. He adored book stores, especially visiting a new shop for the first time, and had spent a happy hour browsing the shelves before purchasing three histories, a book on estate planning, a book on economics during the Elizabethan period and an entire set of Matthew Henry's Biblical commentaries. He had pondered purchasing the commentaries for a few minutes before finally deciding to purchase. He already owned the entire set, but the volumes were at Pemberley in the great library, and this particular collection was offered at a wonderful price. He had assuaged any guilt by contemplating Mr. Collins's potential

enthusiasm. The rector would no doubt relish reading the books and afterwards they could be sent to Darcy's London House, which had its own library.

"Are we finally permitted to leave, Darcy?" Bingley asked with a long suffering groan.

Darcy chuckled unrepentantly. Bingley had dragged him to so many society functions that Darcy found it quite enjoyable to subject his friend to a full hour in a bookstore.

"Yes, we can depart."

The two men stepped down into the street and walked toward their horses just as three red coated militia, accompanied by a group of adoring young ladies, walked into view around a corner. Darcy lifted his head and stiffened; one of the officers was George Wickham, and the woman – girl, really – hanging on his arm was the youngest Bennet, Miss Lydia. He frowned as Wickham's gaze met his own; for a moment, the steward's son looked startled, but then any concern melted away into a look of sly insolence.

Darcy broke eye contact and swung onto his horse, his good mood quite ruined.

Chapter 7

Elizabeth Bennet wrapped her blanket closer to her and stared out into the evening sky. After a chilly but fine day, a multitude of clouds had cluttered up the heavens leaving only grim gray.

"Elizabeth?"

She turned toward her favorite sister, who had entered her room without her noticing.

"Jane. Are you well?"

"Yes, but I worry about you. You seemed distressed at dinner."

Elizabeth sighed and gestured toward the end of the window seat. Jane sat down in response to her invitation and waited.

"Lydia and Kitty went to Meryton this morning to visit our aunt Phillips," Elizabeth explained. "They met Mr. Wickham and several other officers. This afternoon, Kitty was complaining about Mr. Darcy. It seems that Mr. Wickham told her and Lydia further details about Mr. Wickham's dealings with both the elder and younger Mr. Darcys. He

also spoke of Miss Darcy and her proud and lofty nature. It was imprudent of the lieutenant to share such details with our youngest sisters, who are far from careful with their speech."

Jane sighed, "That was unwise, certainly, and unkind. While you can be trusted to hold your tongue, Lydia and Kitty cannot."

"Even if I can be circumspect, and in fact I have not been wise with my words regarding Mr. Darcy, how would Mr. Wickham know my true character based on a short acquaintance?" Elizabeth demanded. "We had only just met at Aunt Philips's house when he poured his story of woe into my willing ears. I do not know, Jane. When I see his face, when I speak to him, Mr. Wickham seems all that is good and wise and charming! And yet …"

"We are none of us perfect beings," Jane mused thoughtfully. "Perhaps Mr. Wickham, because of his outgoing nature, is prone to share more than he ought. But then by the same account, Mr. Darcy may well be a very reserved man and insults without meaning to do so."

"I suppose that is true," her sister replied

irritably, “though there is a big difference between being silent and openly insulting me. I confess that Mr. Darcy’s statement that I was ‘not handsome enough to dance with’ the first day we met still rankles.”

“You are a beautiful woman, Elizabeth. If Mr. Darcy cannot see that, then he is blind.”

“How kind you are, dearest Jane. Mr. Darcy himself is nothing; I do not care for his obvious disapprobation. However, while I do not envy your beauty, and truly I do not, it pains me when Mama compares me to you. I will never quite measure up to you with my bluestocking ways and penchant for walking the country paths alone. I know I am our mother’s least favorite daughter, and it pains me.”

“Oh Lizzy!”

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Fitzwilliam Darcy rolled over in his bed and heaved a deep sigh.

It was very late and the room was almost entirely dark save for the glimmer from the crescent moon shining through the

curtains. The day's weather had been uneasy — first clear, then cloudy, then clear again. The changeable weather reflected his thoughts, which were in turmoil.

Her face flashed into his mind again, that winsome, piquant visage with its fine brown eyes and rosy lips. Elizabeth Bennet was not classically lovely, but the more he saw her, the more he thought of her, the stronger his attraction and the more beautiful she was to him. He had no doubt she felt it too — this magnetism, this spark, this pull.

And yet, she was not worthy of him or Pemberley. He was Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy, master of a great estate, nephew to an earl, heir to an ancient, though untitled, family. Miss Elizabeth was a gentleman's daughter, but her father's estate was small, her younger sisters unruly and gauche and her mother both vulgar and a daughter of trade.

It would not do!

But even if Elizabeth was not worthy to be his wife, he … cared for her. And George Wickham was a danger to the Bennet women, as indeed he was a danger to all women who lay claim to youth and a modicum of beauty. He had seen Miss Lydia Bennet's expression

when she hung on Wickham's arm today and recognized in it the besotted expression of his own young sister, who had believed herself in love with the rogue only months ago.

The terrifying reality was that Wickham had ruined many a woman, and while most had been of the lower classes, there was one example of a gentlewoman sent away to Scotland after her seduction by the steward's son. Miss Anna Slade had met Wickham when her brother John brought Wickham home from Cambridge for the Christmas holidays. John Slade would have been better served to invite a viper into his house than the handsome, charming man who had ruined the girl without a hint of remorse.

Darcy had hoped that he would marry her, but regrettably Miss Anna's dowry was only 2000 pounds, which Wickham found insufficient for his own greedy desires.

Darcy wanted to stop Wickham, wanted to prevent the man from harming other women. But how? If he moved against his old playmate, the man might slander his beloved sister, who had fallen under Wickham's spell during a holiday to Ramsgate on the sea. It was not Georgiana's fault, truly; her companion, Mrs. Younge, had been in league

with Wickham and had encouraged the girl, a romantic fifteen year old, to consent to an elopement to Gretna Greene for a scandalous marriage. By the grace of God, Darcy had arrived unexpectedly and Georgiana told him of the entire affair.

He loved Georgiana with a deep, abiding and protective love. It was his fault, as his younger sister's protector, that she had been left with a traitorous companion at Ramsgate. How could he move against Wickham if harm might come to Georgiana? And yet, was it right to stay quiet and allow other women to suffer?

He rolled over again and then sat up with a grunt of frustration. He lit a candle and checked his watch; it was 2 a.m., and he was no closer to sleep than he had been three hours ago.

With a groan, he rose to his feet, wrapped himself in his dressing gown and crept out of his bedchamber and down the stairway toward the library. The volumes from the bookstore in Meryton had arrived a few hours ago, and he might as well sit and read if he was not able to sleep.

To his considerable surprise, a very

sleepy footman was sitting on a chair outside the library. Darcy gazed at the man, first in bewilderment, then in understanding.

"Mr. Collins is within?" he inquired worriedly.

The man staggered to his feet with a slight wobble, "Yes, sir."

"Go to bed," he ordered. "I will ensure that Mr. Collins makes his way safely back to his room."

"Thank you, sir," the man replied with gratitude.

Inside the room, Mr. Collins was seated next to the fire with several candles on a nearby table. He was reading a book on estate management, but lifted a curious face as Darcy entered the room.

"This is a very interesting book," he stated, his eyes vague.

"It is, Mr. Collins," Darcy agreed. "But sir, it is very late. Should you not go to bed?"

The clergyman shook his head absently, "I can sleep some other time, sir. I will inherit Longbourn someday; I must learn how to best care for the land and people who will be under my direction."

Darcy knew obsession when he saw it, so he merely sat down and stared into the fire. It was very quiet, with the silence only interrupted by the soft ticking of a grandfather clock and the gentle creaking of a tree branch outside the library window.

"Mr. Collins," he said suddenly. This was injudicious, but it was a strange night and he felt a compulsion to seek the wisdom of this odd man.

"Yes, Mr. Darcy?"

"I wonder if I might ask your advice on a significant problem in my life."

Collins closed his book with a snap and sat up straight. "I am most pleased to give you my advice, sir, though I do not promise it will be of use."

"All I ask is your attention and insight," Pemberley's master said gravely. "I wish to discuss a man named George Wickham ..."

Darcy told Mr. Collins all of it, how Wickham was the son of Pemberley's steward and the godson of the now deceased George Darcy. Of how Wickham had been a charming scamp of a child, but had grown dissolute and promiscuous as a young man. Of how he began running up debts and ruining women,

and eventually had tried to elope with a young heiress from a good family. Even here, now, in the grip of Darcy's strange impulse in the darkness of Netherfield at night, Darcy did not feel at peace with revealing his sister's identity. His precious sister's reputation might be destroyed if word escaped that Georgiana had agreed to elope with the scoundrel Wickham.

Collins listened without interruption, his face intent in the flickering light of the candles.

When Darcy had finished his story, Mr. Collins gazed down at his own hands for a full five minutes, thinking hard, before looking up.

"I presume that these women were not physically forced to engage in illicit relations with Mr. Wickham?" he asked slowly.

Darcy swallowed. "I am not aware of force being used, no."

"Do you think he offered any of the young women marriage as part of his seduction?"

"I know that he did," the gentleman said in disgust. "Several distressed fathers came to me when Wickham still resided at Pemberley. The man seduced more than one of their

daughters by promising them marriage, only to leave them ruined, and in several cases, with child."

"And you did nothing to deal with the situation?"

Collins's tone was not accusing, but Darcy still stiffened, "I ensured that the women and their children were provided for financially but no, I did not move against Wickham."

"Why not?" the man inquired reasonably.

Darcy groaned and wiped his brow with one vaguely sweaty hand, "My father was ill for many years before he passed on to his eternal reward. I tried three times to acquaint my father with Wickham's vicious propensities, but he could not see it. To him, George Wickham remained the charming companion of his youth, and to the end my childhood playmate was able to make my father laugh, even when he was in great pain from the last throes of the sickness that took his life."

"And since then?"

"Since then, I have paid the debts he has incurred in various towns, and I have

continued to clean up his messes. I have not known what else to do, Mr. Collins. The young lady in question is a friend of the family. Her reputation could be destroyed if Wickham spoke of what truly happened between them."

"I assume he did not take her virtue?" the clergyman asked gravely.

Darcy shuddered openly, "No! No. She will bring a large dowry into her marriage, and thus he wished for a legal contract instead of a mere seduction."

Silence fell on the two men and a log collapsed, spitting up sparks and providing a brief flare of light.

"I am reminded of the tragic case of King David, his son Amnon and his daughter Tamar," Collins said eventually. "Amnon lusted after his half-sister Tamar, and tricked King David into sending Tamar to make him dinner while Amnon pretended to be sick in his bed. Amnon then raped the poor girl, who was ruined. David was angry but did nothing."

Darcy shivered. "I vaguely remember that horrifying incident, Mr. Collins."

"Amnon was the crown prince of Israel, Mr. Darcy. That made David's actions even more egregious; the man who cruelly

destroyed his own sister would no doubt have been a licentious and wicked king. In the end, David's refusal to act led to Amnon's own death; Absalom, another son of David and Tamar's full brother, took revenge and had his servants cut down Amnon in cold blood during a sheep-shearing feast."

"A deserved fate for a rapist," Darcy said coldly.

"I agree. May I say this, Mr. Darcy? You have never held this Mr. Wickham accountable for his actions, even as David overlooked the horrifying behavior of his eldest son. You have cleaned up after Wickham, probably out of some misplaced sense of guilt as the man was your father's favorite. You need to do the hard thing and stop this evil man from destroying more lives. For that matter, Wickham may be living on borrowed time himself; if he continues to defile young women, an angry father might bring him to a permanent end."

Darcy shifted restlessly. "How? I presume you would not recommend that I have my servants murder the man."

Collins chuckled, "No, of course not. You spoke of debts. Marshalsea, perhaps? You are

an intelligent man, and Wickham, for all his charm, sounds like a fool. His determination to torment you, a wealthy man with connections, is sheer stupidity."

Darcy nodded his head slowly, "Thank you, Mr. Collins."

Chapter 8

Darcy walked slowly down the stairs into the main hall and handed the waiting butler three letters: one to his personal physician, one to his cousin, Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam, and the last to his man of business. He had stayed up late the night before, contemplating the best way to pull the fangs of the miscreant George Wickham, and had decided that discussing the matter with his cousin was the first step. Colonel Fitzwilliam was joined with Darcy in the guardianship of Georgiana, and thus was one of the few people aware of what had occurred at Ramsgate.

After writing his letters, he had fallen asleep, only waking when the sun was already high in the sky. He felt groggy and out of sorts but pleased with his decision to move against Wickham before he could harm another woman.

He walked into the dining room in search of sustenance, but paused when he spied Miss Bingley who was clearly waiting for him.

“Mr. Darcy! Are you quite well, sir?”

“Yes, Miss Bingley,” he replied warily, “I am well indeed.”

“You rose so late!” the lady fluttered. “I was concerned that you had taken ill! But I have it now; you remained upstairs to avoid interacting with our uncouth neighbors. I do not blame you, sir.”

Darcy poured himself some coffee, “The Bennets are here then, Miss Bingley? I wonder that you are not with them since you are your brother’s hostess.”

Miss Bingley’s admittedly pretty face took on an unattractive scowl. “My brother is busy making sheep’s eyes at Miss Bennet in the drawing room with that tedious Miss Mary as chaperone, and Mr. Bennet and Miss Eliza are with Mr. Collins in the library. I trust you do not require that I be in the company of the rector after he called me a pig!”

“I see that still rankles, Miss Bingley,” Mr. Darcy replied gravely, selecting a scone and seating himself. “My offer to take Mr. Collins away still stands, of course. I would not wish for you to be distressed in your home.”

“No, of course not!” Miss Bingley replied

immediately. “No, I merely choose not to be in Mr. Collins’s company if it is not necessary. I do not wish for you to leave, Mr. Darcy. You are quite one of the family.”

Darcy’s lips compressed at this but he merely nodded. “Thank you.”

He ate and drank quickly as Miss Bingley rattled on about her dislike of the neighborhood in general and the Bennets in particular, and then rose and bowed to her before striding rapidly out of the dining room and toward the library. Mr. Collins had also been awake late into the night; he did hope the clergyman was not foolishly exhausting himself.

“You might die at any time, Cousin Bennet,” Mr. Collins was saying as Darcy walked into the room. “Your carriage might crash, or your heart might fail. A sickness could sweep the neighborhood. We are all but a few moments from death, after all.”

Darcy halted in astonishment, both at the words and the scene. Miss Elizabeth was seated on a chair next to the couch and her father, Mr. Bennet, was on another chair next to the fire. Mr. Collins was lying on the couch with a towel across his face.

“Good morning, Mr. Darcy,” Mr. Bennet said, rising to his feet. Darcy was relieved to see that the man wore an expression of amusement. Darcy tried and failed to imagine Lady Catherine’s response if Collins laid out all the ways she could die suddenly.

“Mr. Bennet, Miss Elizabeth,” Darcy said with a slight bow. “Mr. Collins, are you well?”

“My head aches ferociously,” the man explained, not moving from his recumbent position. “As you know, I was awake late into the night reading about estate management.”

“Ought you not to return to your bed, sir?” Darcy inquired worriedly. He knew nothing of head injuries, but surely the patient required adequate rest.

Collins waved a languid hand, “I slept a few hours, Mr. Darcy, and am quite unable to sleep now. When I lie down with a wet towel on my forehead, the pain is minimal. Besides, I must learn from my cousin Bennet about the estate so that I can be a good master. He might die at any time after all.”

Miss Elizabeth, to Darcy’s relief, also seemed amused at this statement, “Well, Mr. Collins, given the truth of that, what would you like to know of first?”

Collins considered this for a minute, “Perhaps it would be helpful to learn of the problem tenants? Are there any?”

Mr. Bennet leaned back in his chair and crossed his ankles as he gestured for Darcy to take a seat across from Elizabeth.

“We are fortunate to have a group of excellent tenants with a few rare exceptions. I cannot think of anyone who is truly difficult.”

“I can,” Miss Elizabeth chimed in with a grimace. “Mr. Nott.”

Bennet heaved a great sigh, “Ah yes, you are quite right, Lizzy. Mr. Nott is definitely a problem tenant.”

“Why?” Darcy asked.

Miss Elizabeth huffed, “He looks the part of an excellent farmer, Mr. Darcy. He is tall and strong, and whenever he knows we are to visit, he is active around the house or farm. But he is a lazy man underneath it all, and his fields suffer.”

“*If any would not work, neither should he eat.* 2 Thessalonians 3:10,” Mr. Collins proclaimed.

“If he were the only one suffering, I would agree with you, Mr. Collins,” Elizabeth

replied with vigor. “Regrettably, he is married and has four small children. His wife is a good woman and does what she can, but she cannot force the man to work the fields appropriately if he refuses to do so. He is not an unpleasant man, Mr. Nott, but he is all too willing to depend on Longbourn benevolence because we will not let his wife and children starve.”

Darcy shook his head, “We have had similar struggles at Pemberley. No one wishes for the children to suffer, though some suffering is sadly inevitable when a father will not carry his proper load.”

“The man is entirely capable of working hard,” Mr. Bennet mused, “He is a vigorous and healthy individual; I have some tenants who are older and have physical challenges, and in those cases I can understand when the job is done less well. It is quite frustrating because as Elizabeth said, he puts on a good show to the outsider.”

“*The Lord seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart*,” Mr. Collins quoted.

Elizabeth gazed thoughtfully on the man, “That is from the Bible, is it not, Mr.

Collins? What is the context?"

The clergyman made as if to sit up, groaned and lay back down. "I must remain supine. I hope you do not mind, Cousin Elizabeth, if I continue to speak while in a rather undignified position."

"Not at all."

"When the Lord ordered the prophet Samuel to anoint a new king of Israel to replace King Saul, Samuel was sent to Jesse of Bethlehem with the knowledge that one of Jesse's sons would be king. Samuel immediately fixed upon Eliab, Jesse's eldest son, as the man to be anointed because he was tall and handsome. But it was not Eliab or any of the next six brothers who were chosen, but the youngest, David, who was a shepherd. For all that David failed in many ways during his long life, he was a man after God's own heart, and clung to the Lord until his death."

Elizabeth shifted her gaze from Mr. Collins to Mr. Darcy who was, to her considerable surprise, staring back at her. She blushed slightly at his regard even as her mind whirled busily.

Had she not fallen into the trap of looking at the outward appearance where Mr.

Wickham was concerned? He was handsome, with gentle speech and manners, but he truly lacked substance. His conversation was of flighty things; he was not a deep thinker, and he was not a hard worker. He had denigrated his godfather's son even as he protested that he would not defame the elder Mr. Darcy's memory.

Mr. Darcy, in turn, also found himself thinking hard. He had insisted to Bingley again and again that Jane Bennet did not love him. But what did he know? Miss Bennet showed by her actions and demeanor that she was a gracious and gentle woman. How could he pretend to understand what was going on in her heart?

Mr. Bennet regarded the young man and woman with amusement. He had noted that Mr. Darcy watched his daughter Elizabeth quite frequently. He also knew that Elizabeth had previously thought very poorly of the Master of Pemberley. Bennet had been indifferent to the man when they first met, but he was inclined to respect Darcy now; he was obviously a well-read man with great concern for his people and estate.

Mr. Collins, too, continued to be an incredible surprise with his insight, learning

and desire to eventually be a good master at Longbourn. Bennet hoped it would be many years before he passed on, but it appeared he would leave his estate in good hands.

Chapter 9

Charles Bingley could not believe how fortunate he was!

He had traveled to Longbourn alone this morning, as Darcy was waiting at Netherfield for his private physician, who was traveling from Town to attend to Mr. Collins. Miss Bingley, of course, did not care to accompany her brother since Darcy was trapped within the main rooms of the mansion waiting on the doctor. The master of Pemberley had been remarkably successful at avoiding Miss Bingley this last week, but today his luck had temporarily run out. Bingley hoped for Darcy's sake that the doctor would not be late.

Bingley had arrived at Longbourn at the beginning of calling hours, and was welcomed most cordially by Mrs. Bennet, Miss Bennet, Miss Kitty and Miss Lydia. He had, after the conventional greetings, sat down next to Miss Bennet, who engaged him in conversation with her usual charm and good humor.

When next he looked up, they were alone in the parlor. Somehow, while he was busy gazing into Miss Bennet's lovely face,

Mrs. Bennet and her younger daughters had been called away. What an extraordinary and delightful circumstance! At last he could speak to Miss Bennet alone!

Miss Bennet too seemed startled to be without a chaperone, and she flushed in embarrassment as she stood up and took a step toward the door. He held out a hand to stay her movement.

"Please, Miss Bennet," he requested. "May I speak to you privately?"

"Yes, Mr. Bingley?" the lady replied, her face growing even rosier as she sat back down.

He hesitated for a moment before continuing intently, "Miss Bennet, I believe that your cousin, Mr. Collins, is affecting my manners. I feel I must tell you this directly; I love and admire you. Do you feel that you can, that is, do you … do you love me as well?"

Jane Bennet briefly looked startled, but a moment later a delighted smile filled her face.

She leaned forward toward the handsome, ginger haired man. "Yes, Mr. Bingley, I do love you very much."

He slid off the couch and onto one knee,

his face looking up into her lovely visage. “Will you marry me, Miss Bennet? Will you join with me before God and man; will you bear my children and be my companion as long as we both shall live?”

“Yes, Mr. Bingley. Yes!”

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“Thank you for journeying from Town today, Doctor Windham,” Darcy said, bowing slightly to the man. Windham was an excellent physician with a pleasant demeanor and had served the Darcy family with distinction for some five years.

“It was my honor, Mr. Darcy,” the physician replied. “I regret that I was unable to journey here for a full week after I received your letter. Mr. Collins seems like a riveting case.”

Darcy nodded as he gestured toward the stairwell, “He is in his bedchamber this morning, Doctor. He has been troubled with headaches of varying intensities, though he continues to be entirely rational and, dare I say, brilliant.”

“Is he reading a great deal?” Windham inquired.

“Constantly.”

The medical man shook his head disapprovingly, “He really ought not to read much after a head injury. It is regrettable that the apothecary did not forbid it.”

“It would not matter whether he was forbidden to read or not,” Darcy replied. “As I said in my letter, Collins appears to be a genius. He has said more than once that he must read or his brain grows frenetic.”

“And yet there was no sign of this genius before he fell and struck his head?”

“Yes.”

“Fascinating,” Doctor Windham said with enthusiasm. “Most fascinating, sir!”

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“I hope you do not have early duty, Wickham,” Mr. Pratt commented, his grin barely visible in the light of the full moon.

Wickham chuckled, “I have nothing to do until after noon tomorrow — well, today

actually. I will spend the entire morning in my bed, I assure you."

Pratt slapped his fellow officer on the back, "And when evening comes, I will win all that money back from you, my friend. Be prepared!"

"Until then, Pratt," Wickham agreed cheerfully. In fact, he was quite certain he would continue winning against Lieutenant Pratt, who combined a decent allowance with a sad inability to play cards. He was the very best kind of friend.

With a last inebriated smile, Pratt turned the corner while Wickham continued on toward his own quarters. It was very late and the wind was cold through his red coat, but the thrum of alcohol in his veins and the new coins in his pocket made him happy indeed.

Thus far Meryton was treating him well. There were plenty of attractive ladies who were inclined to swoon at the sight of his fine figure in its red coat. There were plenty of fellow militia officers willing to pay up when he won in their games of chance and to accept his vowels when he lost. Lastly, the militia was respected, and thus Wickham was finding it delightfully easy to purchase from the

shopkeepers now with a promise to pay later. The regiment would move elsewhere in a few months, and Wickham would start afresh in a new city where his penchant for not paying his debts was unknown.

Yes, the militia had been an excellent career choice, and life had gifted him one last special fillip of pleasure; Darcy was in residence at the nearby estate of Netherfield and had managed to offend nearly the entire community with his arrogant ways. Wickham had thoroughly enjoyed defaming his former playmate to the local ladies, and especially the Bennet women. The eldest Miss Bennet was as lovely a creature as Wickham had ever beheld, though she was too placid for his tastes. The second, Miss Elizabeth, was a sparkling young woman with a fine wit (and figure) and it would be most enjoyable …

Well, time would tell if Miss Elizabeth was open to an intimate relationship that did not include marriage. If the girl had a good dowry, he might actually be interested in wedding her, but regrettably Longbourn was entailed away and the daughters' dowries were reputedly pathetic.

Wickham turned right and plunged into the alleyway which ran between the main

street and the smaller road where he lodged. The narrow passage was dark and noxious from garbage thrown from the upper windows of the adjacent buildings, but it cut off a substantial walk. He was tired and wanted his bed.

There was a sudden flare of a tallow candle and Wickham stopped in confusion, which was quickly followed by terror. There were four men hovering in the dim light and before he could move, before he could yell, two of them leaped forward and grabbed him, roughly pinioning his arms behind him and tying them together. Another man shoved a handkerchief in his mouth and tied it behind his head. Within a minute, he found himself being carried the rest of the way down the alleyway where he was quickly bundled into a carriage.

What was happening?

There was the sound of a cane rapping the top of the carriage and the vehicle jolted into motion. A minute later, the darkness was broken by the flare of another candle, this one made of wax, and Wickham observed, through dilating eyes of fury and terror, the familiar face of Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam, second son of the Earl of Matlock and Darcy's cousin.

“Good evening, Wickham,” the Colonel said cheerfully. “I am sure that I am the last person you wish to see and you can tell me all about it, but I will wait to remove the gag until we are well out of Meryton. I would not care to distress the inhabitants whose sleep would be disturbed by your screams.”

Wickham wiggled madly but his hands were firmly tied and the gag prevented him from doing anything more than grunting. After a minute, he subsided.

Ten minutes later, Fitzwilliam leaned forward and removed the gag, though he left Wickham’s hands bound.

“What is this?” Wickham snarled once he had worked some moisture into his dry mouth. “How dare you abduct me in this way?”

“Ah, but this is not an abduction, Wickham,” Fitzwilliam replied jovially. “This is, in fact, a noble effort towards protecting our fair lands from the French scourge. You, my old enemy, are going to sea.”

Wickham gazed at him with confusion, “Sea? What drivel is this? I am not going to sea!”

Fitzwilliam leaned back and crossed his

legs. “Ah, but you are, Wickham,” the other man drawled. “Did you really think you could run up debts, ruin women across England, attempt to elope with Miss Darcy, and slander the Darcy name without any consequences? I have a friend who is a naval captain; he is very much in need of sailors for his ship, and I was most pleased to offer him your services. I realize, of course, that you are not used to the ways of the navy, but you are a smart fellow and will no doubt pick up the basics rapidly, especially if you are faced with a possible flogging if you should fail.”

Wickham listened to this with a sense of unreality. Was he merely in the midst of a drunken nightmare? It must be so. He had gone his own way for many years and Darcy had never curbed him; even after his foiled attempt to elope with Georgiana, Darcy had only sent him a nasty letter, which Wickham had thrown into the fire.

But no, the ropes cutting into his wrists were real enough as was the smell of the candle. No, this was truly happening.

“This … this is absurd,” he finally croaked. “You cannot kidnap me, Fitzwilliam. Even the Matlocks would not dare such a thing.”

“Nonsense, my dear fellow, of course we would! Press ganging is a respected method of filling one’s ship’s quota, after all. You are not the most useful of specimens since you have no experience, but my good friend, Captain Wolfe, is willing to take you on as a favor to the Matlocks.”

Wickham paled and swayed. “You cannot! I am a lieutenant in the militia, Fitzwilliam! More than that, I am the godson of George Darcy! You cannot treat me like a common drunken sailor!”

The other man shrugged. “That argument might work with Darcy, but it will not work with me. If I had come across you at Ramsgate, I would have thrust my sword through your soft, lazy, genteel body and been done with it. Darcy has been too lenient with you, but he finally decided that you needed to be dealt with in a more permanent fashion. I am most appreciative of his request for assistance, plus the information that you were here in Meryton. Once I knew that, I proceeded with my little plan to remove you from England’s shores.”

“I will destroy Georgiana’s reputation,” Wickham threatened, barely succeeding in keeping his tone firm.

“That is Miss Darcy to you, Wickham,” the Colonel replied, his tone icy. “My captain friend’s frigate, the *Dominion*, has orders to patrol the Caribbean Sea. I assure you that you will not return to England for several years, and I sincerely doubt your fellow sailors will care about your stories regarding a young lady. If you should be so foolish as to affect my cousin’s reputation, I promise you that you will leave the *Dominion* in a shroud. Is that entirely clear, Wickham?”

The steward’s son opened his mouth and closed it, too terrified, too horrified, too stunned to speak.

“Good,” Fitzwilliam replied with grim satisfaction. “I am glad we understand one another.”

Chapter 10

Dec. 15th, 1811

Darcy,

Many thanks for giving me Wickham's direction and encouragement to move against the louse. You will be pleased to hear that our old enemy is now installed uncomfortably on His Majesty's frigate Dominion*, en route to the Caribbean Sea where the ship will patrol the waters for at least two years. I have an old friend who is the captain of said ship, and he agreed to take on the onerous task of beating our old friend into some semblance of a seaman. Wickham is intelligent enough, at any rate; he will no doubt learn what he must in order to save his handsome hide.*

I sent an obscure letter to Colonel Forster, commander of the regiment in Meryton, informing him that Wickham had been conscripted for an important task. That should keep tongues wagging in a useful fashion in that backwater in which you have found yourself.

I gather Bingley is enjoying being the master of an estate. You are both lucky dogs, you know, to have such wealth at your fingertips. Ah

well, I have my own pleasures in life. Indeed, I confess that the thought of Wickham climbing the masts of a frigate makes me nearly giddy with delight.

Yours, Richard Fitzwilliam

Darcy read through the letter twice more before leaning back in his chair in his private sitting room at Netherfield. He felt an odd mixture of relief, guilt, mirth and astonishment. He had thought that he and Richard would exchange stately letters discussing how best to deal with George Wickham; instead, the colonel had leapt into action and press ganged George Darcy's godson. In retrospect, Darcy should have expected such rapid action; Fitzwilliam was an army man, and used to making vital decisions at short notice.

An English ship was a dangerous place to live and work, especially now with the war against the Corsican tyrant at its peak. There was a good chance that Wickham would not survive the next few years.

But did the man not deserve such a fate? He had ruined women and cheated shopkeepers, defamed Darcy and tried to steal

away his godfather's only daughter in a scandalous marriage.

He could only be thankful that Colonel Fitzwilliam had moved so rapidly and without speaking to Darcy; the deed was done, Wickham was at sea and Elizabeth ... the women of Meryton were safe.

With that firmly settled in his mind, Darcy rolled to his feet, carefully stowed the letter away, and made his way downstairs.

Bingley was no doubt at Longbourn, as he had been for the last week since he had offered for Miss Bennet. Darcy had accompanied his friend once and been overwhelmed at Mrs. Bennet's effusive joy at the occasion, and since then had stayed back at Netherfield to keep Mr. Collins company. Now Darcy's personal physician was in residence as well. The man had examined Collins the first day he arrived and then, at Bingley's hearty invitation, stayed over for another two days. Doctor Windham was openly astonished at Collins's abilities, which was something of a relief. Darcy considered himself an intelligent, well-read man, and yet he found himself feeling like an ignoramus at times when Collins held forth on what he had read. It was not just that Collins remembered

so much; it was that he was able to tie together disparate threads to come up with fascinating suggestions and conclusions.

Darcy walked into the library and felt his heart speed up with excitement. Miss Elizabeth was present along with her father, Mr. Bennet, Dr. Windham and of course Mr. Collins. The latter traveled between his room, where he slept, ate and completed any necessary ablutions, and the library, where he was either reading books or talking about various and sundry complex ideas.

"Mr. Darcy," Mr. Bennet said with a smile, though he did not stand up. "I hope you do not mind that Lizzy and I have invaded Netherfield this morning. I am afraid that Mrs. Bennet has filled the air of Longbourn with talk of lace and the wedding breakfast."

"Not at all," Darcy replied, his face unknowingly taking on its usual hauteur. The truth was that his fascination with Miss Elizabeth was thoroughly alarming, and every time he was in her presence, the attraction between them grew. And yet he could not offer for her. Bingley was but one generation removed from trade, and thus marriage to the eldest daughter of a country gentleman, even a poor one, was a step up socially. But he was

Fitzwilliam Darcy, son of George and Lady Anne Darcy, nephew of an earl. He could not offer for Miss Elizabeth, and thus must discourage the woman as much as possible. He had no doubt that Miss Elizabeth felt the magnetic pull between them, but he must not give her false hopes. That would be cruel.

"Miss Elizabeth," he said belatedly, "Dr. Windham, Mr. Collins, I hope you are all well."

"I am well, Mr. Darcy," Elizabeth replied with her usual enchanting smile. "And while I cannot speak to the good health of the others, I believe we are all being intellectually stimulated, sir. We are discussing whether England would be better served if she were not ruled by a king, but instead by a president like the former American colonies."

"A fascinating discussion indeed," Darcy stated with some astonishment. It seemed treasonous to imagine such a thing.

"It would not work here, and I wonder whether it can work long in the American States," Bennet commented. "It is the way of things for a strong willed man to seize power and make himself king."

"I believe they are quite opposed to the

idea of a king," Doctor Windham observed.

"Then some kind of a Protector, like Oliver Cromwell," Bennet averred. "Cromwell never crowned himself king, but he was a dictator nonetheless."

"I agree that ambitious men tend to strive for ultimate power," Collins said patiently. "Nor am I at all certain that the American experiment will succeed, though I believe their first president's decision to step down after eight years in power set an important precedent. I am proffering the idea that the existence of a king is not ideal for the people of a nation, because too often kings, and queens and nobles grasp for riches and power, to the harm of the people under their care."

"Did not God himself order that King Saul be crowned king of Israel?" the doctor inquired.

"The people of Israel demanded a king," Collins stated, leaning forward with steepled hands. "They wished to be like the nations around them. God warned them through the prophet Samuel that a king would tax the people excessively, snatch their sons to fight in his armies and their daughters to cook and

bake for his household. Of particular interest to me is that Samuel warned that the kings would recruit men to run before his chariots; this came to pass when Absalom moved in rebellion against his father David. In any case, the Lord warned of the dangers of asking for a king to rule over them."

"But people do need leaders," Darcy argued. "Someone must lead, and surely it is better to have a man with expertise, with education, with honor, with experience to lead those under their care."

"You are an excellent overseer, Mr. Darcy," Collins stated judicially. "You are attentive, hard-working, diligent and intelligent. I would argue that many masters and mistresses of great estates have far more interest in filling their own coffers than caring for those dependent on their estates. According to the books I have read regarding estate management, it is the purview and responsibility of the overlord to introduce modern farming practices to the tenantry. I confess I do not know the details of many estates but I do know this; at least two tenants at Rosings wish to use the Tullian drill on their fields, but Lady Catherine refuses. In your aunt's case, I absolve her of indifference to the

plight of her workers — I would argue she is overly involved in their lives in some ways — but she is ignorant as to the value of the Tullian drill in sowing seed."

"How dare you, Mr. Collins!"

All five individuals leaped to their feet in astonishment at these words as a middle aged lady, dressed in expensive traveling clothes, surged into the room, her face ripe with fury.

"Lady Catherine!" Darcy cried out in astonishment. "What are you doing here?"

"What am I doing?" the lady repeated angrily, advancing rapidly on the stunned clergyman. "I am here to ascertain the medical condition of my rector, who has obviously gone mad. How dare you speak against me, sir? I am Lady Catherine de Bourgh, daughter of the Earl of Matlock. You are nobody at all, the son of an illiterate miser, permitted on Rosings grounds out of the benevolence of my heart. But never again, Mr. Collins. Never again!"

Darcy flinched in anticipation of what would likely be a thoroughly impertinent response from Mr. Collins, but the reality was far worse than he anticipated. To his

astonishment, Collins, after staring at the outraged Lady Catherine for a full thirty seconds, suddenly collapsed onto the couch, his face crumbled in terror, a hand lifted to protect his face.

"Please!" he screamed. "Please. Don't hurt me. I won't … I promise I won't read again. Please don't hit me, Father. Please!"

"The man is insane!" Lady Catherine cried out. Darcy rushed forward towards Mr. Collins, barely aware of Miss Bingley standing just inside the door, a definite smirk on her face.

"Mr. Collins," Elizabeth said in a soothing voice. "Mr. Collins. You are safe. Please do not cry, sir."

"I am sorry," the man sobbed, now huddled in a fetal position. "I am sorry, Father. So sorry!"

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"Obviously the man belongs in Bedlam!" Lady Catherine snarled.

Mr. Collins had been nearly carried upstairs by three footmen with Doctor

Windham in attendance, leaving Darcy in the library with his aunt, Mr. Bennet, Miss Elizabeth and an obviously smug Miss Bingley.

"No, he does not," Darcy said evenly, struggling to maintain his temper.

"Indeed, Lady Catherine," Elizabeth insisted boldly. "Mr. Collins has been entirely lucid and reasonable for the last two weeks. For some reason, your arrival sparked a breakdown."

The lady looked down her long nose at Elizabeth and raised a haughty brow, "And who might you be, young lady?"

"I am Miss Elizabeth Bennet of Longbourn," the girl responded, lifting her chin at the older lady's arrogant tones.

"And you are?" Lady Catherine demanded, turning to Mr. Bennet.

"Mr. Thomas Bennet, Elizabeth's father," Bennet replied, torn between genuine concern for his cousin and delight at the arrival of a lady with an obviously remarkable personality.

"I hope for your sakes that my parson's insanity devolved from a different branch of the family, Mr. Bennet, else you may all find yourself in Bedlam as well!"

“Lady Catherine!” Darcy remonstrated, reddening slightly. He had forgotten how very rude his aunt could be.

“I cannot fathom why you are denying what is obvious to us all,” the lady responded regally. “Miss Bingey informed me of Mr. Collins’s erratic behavior, and I heard his deranged speech with my own ears. How dare he criticize me as mistress of Rosings? How dare he speak against our King and nobles and gentry!”

Darcy bent a disapproving stare on Miss Bingley, who looked uncomfortable but nonetheless spoke up, “You must admit, Mr. Darcy, that the clergyman has been quite unwell since his injury. He keeps spouting out Scripture in the most bizarre manner. He called me a swine!”

Catherine de Bourgh glanced at the mistress of the house absently. “You may not be a pig, Miss Bingley, but you do look rather like an apricot. That shade of orange does not become you. I should know. I am always dressed in the most appropriate and sophisticated manner.”

Darcy heard a choking sound and glanced over to see both Mr. Bennet and

Elizabeth struggling not to laugh. In the midst of a challenging and emotional situation, he felt his heart lurch in his chest again. Miss Elizabeth was so beautiful, so vibrant, so bold. There were few women who would stand up to Lady Catherine, much less laugh at her, no matter how much his aunt deserved it.

He wanted to marry her. But no, he must not forget what he owed to Georgiana! For her sake, he must marry a woman with the highest of connections. Otherwise, sweet, timid, precious Georgie might well be hindered in her ability to make a good match.

"I want Mr. Collins out of here, Mr. Darcy," Miss Bingley stated in a determined fashion, yanking him out of his reverie. "I have done my best to be a kind hostess, but he is clearly mad and I do not feel safe with him in residence."

"That is entirely reasonable, Miss Bingey," Lady Catherine replied.

"Miss Bingley," the woman corrected, though softly.

"I will arrange for Mr. Collins to be transported to Bedlam on the morrow."

"No, you will not!" Darcy and Elizabeth said together, and then glanced at one another

in surprise.

“He is my clergyman, Darcy! As for you, Miss Elizabeth, how dare you involve yourself in a matter which is of no possible concern to you?”

“On the contrary, Lady Catherine,” Mr. Bennet said coldly, stepping forward protectively next to his daughter. “Mr. Collins is my cousin and heir to Longbourn. We have far more right to determine his fate than you do!”

“He holds the Hunsford living! How can you seriously argue that a man who rolls around on the couch, whimpering like a baby, is worthy of overseeing my parish?”

“A curate could fulfill his duties,” Elizabeth retorted.

“For how long? Truly, this is outrageous! Why are you denying what is so obvious to everyone, that Mr. Collins is insane!”

“He is a brilliant man who suffered an extremely difficult childhood,” Darcy argued. “It is unconscionable to consider locking him up in an asylum.”

“It is not your decision to make, Darcy. I will not allow him in Hunsford, Miss Bingey no longer will host him here and I doubt that

Longbourn, filled as it is with young ladies, is an appropriate place for a feebleminded man."

Darcy glanced at Elizabeth, who was biting her lip in a thoroughly adorable manner.

"I will take him to Pemberley," he announced suddenly. He had to leave Hertfordshire now or he would offer for Elizabeth Bennet. Every hour in her presence was an exquisite torment; only by fleeing would he escape her tantalizing snare.

His aunt's expression shifted from outrage to astonishment, "Pemberley! Do you seriously intend to take a madman to live in the same house as my niece? You are as demented as Mr. Collins is!"

Darcy gritted his teeth, "He is not insane, nor is he in any way dangerous. Find a curate to fill in for Mr. Collins, Lady Catherine, and we will determine the disposition of the living at a later date."

Lady Catherine began sputtering in outrage, but Darcy found his attention shifting to Miss Elizabeth. He feared that he would see disappointment in her eyes over his decision to leave, but instead she looked enormously grateful.

“Thank you, Mr. Darcy. It is very kind of you to care for our poor cousin.”

“It is my honor, Miss Elizabeth.”

Chapter 11

"I am sorry I will not be able to attend your wedding," Darcy said regretfully, holding out his hand to Charles Bingley.

Bingley grasped the hand and shook it, "I am sorry too, Darcy, but I know Jane is relieved that you will care for Mr. Collins. I thank you for that. How is he this morning?"

Darcy glanced briefly at his carriage, which was waiting in the lane beside Netherfield Hall. It was still very early and the eastern sky was pink with the glow of the still hidden sun and the horses' breath made white puffs in the clear air.

"He is calm now," Darcy said softly. "He is almost childlike in his demeanor, but he is no longer terrified. I have an excellent physician who serves the residents of Pemberley and I am certain can provide good advice and oversight."

"Thank you for all your assistance here at Netherfield, Darcy. It is most appreciated."

"It is my pleasure, Bingley. I feel some trepidation over inflicting Lady Catherine on

you this morning, but if we are to make Pemberley in three days, we must be well on our way before my aunt rises from her bed. It was kind of you to offer her and her retinue food and shelter after she disrupted your household."

Charles shrugged, "I would not wish your aunt to be traveling at night in winter, and regarding her disapprobation, I am not at all concerned, Darcy. Lady Catherine cannot harm me, and I have your friendship to sustain my spirits if she should be abusive. Besides, given the eruption in the library yesterday, which regrettably I missed, I daresay it will be better for everyone if Mr. Collins does not meet Lady Catherine for some time."

Darcy sighed, "That is true enough. She may well be unpleasant, but do not take it to heart. I do have one favor to ask, Bingley. You have heard me speak of Mr. George Wickham?"

"Yes. I do not know details of his behavior toward you, but I know you dislike and despise him."

"I do. He has recently removed from Meryton and has no doubt racked up debts at the local drinking establishments and shops.

Would you send a servant to pay off those debts and collect the receipts? I will pay you back forthwith."

"Certainly, Darcy."

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"Really, Miss Bingey, what kind of table is this? Where are the bath cakes? I require bath cakes every morning; I cannot break my fast without them."

Caroline Bingley pinched her lips and rose to her feet, "My apologies, Lady Catherine. I will see if there are any bath cakes for your pleasure."

"Do, girl, do," Lady Catherine ordered, waving an imperious hand. Miss Bingley, torn between her desire to please the lady and irritation at being lectured, took a few steps toward the door only to halt as her brother walked into the room.

"Charles," she hissed. "Of all the days to sleep long! Lady Catherine has been wondering where you were."

"I have," Lady Catherine agreed, taking a sip of her tea and wrinkling her face in

disapproval. Really, what a poorly run household to serve the wrong kind of tea! "You must learn to rise early, Mr. Bingey, if you are to have any hope of successfully running an estate. Though truly I am certain that is entirely beyond your reach. Blood tells, sir, blood tells. You are the son of a man of trade, and at heart, a tradesman you will remain."

Bingley found this immensely amusing, especially as the clock showed 11 in the morning. The hour was quite late for breakfast.

"We will see, Lady Catherine," he replied jovially. "In any case, I am very happy here at Netherfield and with Darcy's help, I have learned much regarding how best to run an estate."

"Speaking of Darcy, where is he?" the mistress of Rosings demanded irritably. "It certainly shows what happens when a gentleman spends significant time with the lower classes; Darcy used to be a very punctual individual and here it is, almost noon, and he is still lying about in bed! Unconscionable."

Bingley shook his head as he wandered

over to the buffet table and began selecting some cold meats, “Darcy is not here, Lady Catherine. I said farewell to him early this morning as he left for Pemberley with Mr. Collins. I am certain he would have given you his regards before departing, but you had not yet risen.”

“What?!” Caroline Bingley and Catherine de Bourgh cried out in unison.

Bingley tried, and failed, to suppress a smirk, “Darcy is gone.”

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“Lizzy, Lydia, Kitty, how delightful to see you girls!”

“Good morning, Aunt Phillips,” Elizabeth said affectionately, putting her arms around her aunt. Mrs. Phillips was Mrs. Bennet’s older sister and married to a local solicitor of whom she was very fond. Mrs. Phillips was a vulgar soul, but a kindly one.

“And where is Jane this morning?” Emma Phillips inquired with a wink. “No doubt dreaming of Mr. Bingley? Really, such a fine thing for her, and indeed for all of you!

Such a handsome man, so rich and no doubt he has wealthy friends whom he might well introduce to you!"

"Mr. Bingley is well enough," Lydia said with a toss of her dark head, "but he does not wear a red coat! I wish to marry an officer!"

"Oh my, speaking of officers, have you heard about Mr. Wickham?"

"Mr. Wickham? What about Mr. Wickham? " Lydia responded, adding dreamily. "He is such a wonderful man. He very much adores my company, you know, and my looks."

"Well, my dears," their aunt said, gesturing for them to take their seats in the drawing room, "the news is spreading through Meryton that the man was arrested for treason!"

"Treason?" Elizabeth gasped in disbelief. "Mr. Wickham?"

"Yes! Either that or he was recruited for a secret mission for the King himself. So either he is a very bad man, or a very brave one. In any case, he is gone from Meryton."

"Gone?" Kitty inquired piteously. "He was the very best looking of all the officers!"

“He must be on a secret mission,” Lydia insisted. “He is such a charming gentleman, and so handsome!”

“Well, as to that my dears, the word is that he has left debts in all the stores in Meryton! Furthermore, though I should not mention this, there is a rumor that the young barmaid at the *Pig and the Poke*, the Widow Smyth’s daughter, Sarah — well they do say that Mr. Wickham enticed the girl into his bed, and her young man, Joshua Miller, has thrown her over!”

Elizabeth paled in horror at this, “Surely not, Aunt!”

“That is what they are saying,” Mrs. Phillips said, delight over this juicy piece of gossip contending with her natural concern for the girl.

“I do not believe a word of it!” Lydia said indignantly. “Mr. Wickham with a barmaid? That is ridiculous!”

Elizabeth frowned. The knowledge that Wickham was gone from Meryton was certainly a surprise but these rumors, if true, painted him as a degenerate man.

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“Have you read the English translations of the works of the French scientist, Antoine Levoisier, the man who identified the element oxygen and studied the role of that element in combustion?”

Darcy jerked awake at these words and passed a hand over his mouth, irritated to discover that he had drooled slightly in his sleep.

“I am sorry, Mr. Collins, what did you say?”

Collins was sitting upright across from him, his blazing eyes fixed on Pemberley’s master.

“Antoine Levoisier,” he said impatiently. “His recognition of oxygen as a chemical element of its own, plus his understanding in its role of combustion, was a major breakthrough in the chemical sciences! Surely you must see that, Mr. Darcy.”

Fitzwilliam Darcy smiled genuinely at the portly man across from him, “Welcome back, Mr. Collins. Welcome back.”

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“I take no leave of you, Mr. Bingey, and I send no compliments to your insipid sister. I hold your degenerate family entirely to blame for this catastrophe. Darcy has always had a proper understanding of his position in society but you have ruined him forever. To think of my own nephew running off to Pemberley with an insane clergyman. It is a disgrace!”

“I do hope you will have a pleasant journey,” Charles Bingley responded with a courteous smile and bow.

Lady Catherine pursed her lips and allowed herself to be handed into the carriage by one of the footmen who had accompanied her. A few seconds later, the equipage jolted into motion and proceeded out of the Netherfield lane and onto the main road to Meryton.

Bingley heaved a soft sigh of relief, which was shared by his butler, who was standing at the top of the stairs that led to the main entrance of the house. Lady Catherine had irritated all the servants at Netherfield with her endless demands and constant criticism.

He climbed the steps, relishing the cool air of December, before entering Netherfield and walking into the drawing room, where his sister Caroline was standing near a window gazing outside blankly.

"Caroline," he said without enthusiasm.

"Charles, is Lady Catherine gone?"

"Yes."

"Did she say anything on her departure about her stay here?"

"She said several things, none of them either encouraging or positive."

Caroline Bingley looked slightly sick, "Do you suppose she will denigrate my abilities as a hostess to her connections? She is the daughter of an earl!"

Charles shrugged, "I doubt it. Darcy tells me that she rarely leaves Rosings and takes no part in the London social scene."

His sister's body relaxed and she nodded, "That is good, at least. I do not blame her for her exasperation over Mr. Darcy's departure. It is truly ludicrous that he left Netherfield to care for Mr. Collins! It is unconscionable that the Bennets would abandon their tiresome cousin such that Mr.

Darcy was forced to take on his care, but that is to be expected from such an uncivilized family."

Bingley, who had been only partially listening to her whining, turned abruptly at these words and took a menacing step toward her.

"You are speaking of the family of the woman I am going to marry," he stated angrily. "How dare you?"

Caroline flushed slightly but glared back at him, "I speak only the truth, Charles. It is too late to break your engagement, but you will live to regret your decision to ally yourself with the Bennets, mark my words. Jane is a pleasant enough woman but her parents are dreadful and as for Miss Elizabeth, with her so called fine eyes, she is a shrew!"

Charles stared at her in incredulity which shifted into determination.

"Very well, Caroline," he said with glacial calm. "Given that you dislike Jane's family, it is obvious you will not be happy here at Netherfield after my marriage. You and Louisa and Hurst will leave for London within the week."

His sister blinked in disbelief, "What? I

am not leaving!”

“Yes, you are,” Bingley stated, amazed at the deep core of resolve in his spirit. He loved Jane Bennet dearly. He would not permit his gentle angel to be exposed to a constant barrage of disapproval from his witch of a sister.

“Charles! Be reasonable! You cannot cast us out!”

“I can, and I will and I do. Indeed, given that Darcy is no longer here, I see no reason why you would wish to stay in the countryside anyway. You only came in the futile hope of enticing Darcy to offer for you. But mark my words carefully, Caroline, you can either leave within the week, or tomorrow. If you wail and whine, it will be tomorrow. It is entirely your choice.”

Chapter 12

February 12th, 1812

Darcy,

There is a Bible verse about how a man who finds a wife finds a good thing. It is something like that at any rate – I need Mr. Collins here to elucidate.

And it is true. My dear Jane -- oh Darcy, she completes me as God intended. She is such a sweet, gentle, kind, lovely soul. We are very happy & joyful together.

I find Netherfield far more appealing without Caroline and Louisa here. You remember how negative they were toward the people of Meryton. I suppose many of the local folk do not have Town manners, but I do not mind that. Even the ones who are, I suppose, rather on the vulgar and unrefined side tend to be quite generous. I suppose I prefer the country to town, when all is said and done. Does that mean I am truly a gentleman? If I can be anything like you, then I will be content …

The door to Bingley's study opened and

he looked up to see his beautiful wife standing in the doorway. She rarely looked openly ruffled, but he could tell that she was unsettled. Given the presence of guests for tea, he could also guess *why* she was so disquieted.

He walked over to embrace her lovingly, "Your family?"

"Yes," Jane replied with a sigh. "Mother means well, but she can be wearing at times. It has only been six weeks since our wedding! It is not surprising that I am not yet with child."

Bingley tightened his grip slightly as he glanced at the letter on his desk. He could finish it later.

"Of course I am not concerned in the least," he murmured into her beautiful ear. "But perhaps we ought to try to please your mother by …"

She laughed at this and a minute later they were climbing the stairs hastily to their bedroom.

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February 25th, 1812

Bingley,

I am delighted that you and the new Mrs. Bingley are enjoying connubial bliss. She is a charming woman with a delightful personality, and I have no doubt that you will enjoy a long and happy life together.

Mr. Collins seems at peace here at Pemberley. He spends most of his days in the library, reading at a shockingly rapid pace. We dine together whenever I am available, and inevitably I rise from the table with a fatigued mind. He continues to astonish me with his ability to not only retain, but analyze and consider the information he reads.

I have a friend from my Eton years who is acquainted with Mr. Sydney Smith, the clergyman and writer who currently holds a living in Foston-le-Clay in Yorkshire. I have asked for an introductory letter in the hopes that I can connect Collins to Smith; the latter has presumably determined how to live a vibrant life as an intellectual clergyman. I daresay you have not read Smith's articles in the Edinburgh Review but Mr. Collins considers them brilliant, and I agree.

Regarding Mr. Collins's mental state, he is doing well. Our local doctor is fascinated with him as a patient and visits him often. I think it clear that Mr. Collins ought not to be in contact with my aunt, Lady Catherine. If he maintains his

current demeanor, he and she will clash unremittingly. Worse of course would be a reversion to his hysterical state when last they met. I believe I will offer Mr. Collins a small living some ten miles from here; the current holder of the living is elderly and wishes to retire soon. I find Mr. Collins a most stimulating companion and a pleasant addition to the neighborhood. It would be a pity to lose such a brilliant mind.

Thank you for asking about my sister. Georgiana is doing very well. She spends much time playing the pianoforte and is making great progress with her French lessons.

My congratulations again on your marriage, Bingley.

Sincerely,

Fitzwilliam Darcy

Darcy laid down his pen and massaged his fingers. He had conducted much business in the last few days and his hand was weary.

He leaned back and his lips tightened. Every time he wrote even peripherally of Mrs. Bingley, he was reminded of her sister, Elizabeth Bennet. The second born Bennet daughter was pert and utterly unworthy of

Pemberley, but Darcy found he could not forget her. In fact, he often found himself visualizing her light and pleasing figure in the dining room, the library, the drawing room, his own bedroom …

He shook his head quickly to dispel those improper thoughts and stood up quickly. Outside his office, the soft strains of the pianoforte drew him into the music room, where Georgiana was playing one of Beethoven's pieces. Mr. Collins sat nearby, his eyes closed, his face peaceful, with a footman in attendance. Given the man's somewhat uncertain physical and mental status, Darcy had assigned several footmen to take turns attending to his guest except when Collins was in his bedroom. The rector was often caught up in his own complex thoughts and, on more than one occasion, wandered absently into the kitchens and even outside, whereupon the footman had turned him gently around.

"Brother!"

Darcy smiled adoringly at this sister.

"Georgiana, that was lovely."

This was why he must marry well, for his young sister's sake. He loved her desperately and had already failed her by

allowing Wickham to approach her at Ramsgate. He would not fail her again.

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Mr. James Bennet lifted his eyes from the letter in his hand and called out, “Come in!”

Elizabeth opened the door and stepped in, curiosity on her face.

“You called for me, Father?”

“Yes, please do sit down, Elizabeth. I just received a most astonishing letter from my cousin, Mr. Collins, and I wish you to read it. Really for all that I dislike writing letters, I would not give up Mr. Collins’s correspondence for the world! His remarkable brilliance is combined with a blunt simplicity that gives me such great joy. But you must be curious. Please read this, Elizabeth, and tell me what you think.”

Elizabeth took the letter with interest and opened it to read.

Pemberley

April 2nd, 1812

Dear Cousin Bennet,

Although Lady Catherine de Bourgh is an arrogant, officious shrew, I have concluded that she gave good advice when she ordered me – in my former state – to come to Hertfordshire and find myself a wife.

Not that I need to marry one of your daughters, precisely, but ideally I should marry a woman from the region of Longbourn. Unless Mrs. Bennet should die and you remarry a younger woman, you will not have a son. Thus, Longbourn will devolve to me after you breathe your last. I have been studying estate management and discussing such matters with Mr. Darcy, and believe I have a strong understanding of the intellectual aspects of such a task; however, the books mention the blessing of local familiarity with the populace, and that I do not have. I could, I suppose, move to Meryton but I am most content here with Mr. Darcy. His library is incredible, Cousin, absolutely amazing. You cannot believe the depth and breadth of knowledge encased in its tomes.

I have spoken to Mr. Darcy of this matter, and he agrees that marrying a local woman would be ideal. He is a most gracious host and

has offered to open the doors of Pemberley to you and any of your daughters who wish to travel here, with the express purpose of determining whether one of them would prove a suitable bride for me.

I think it obvious that it will not be a love match, and thus your daughters should not come if they require such a thing. I certainly do not look down upon the pleasures of emotional love but such is not for a man like me.

You are also, of course, aware of my doubtful mental state at times. My interaction with Lady Catherine at Netherfield was most regrettable. I hope that with time will come healing. Oddly, it seems that listening to the pianoforte, played by Miss Darcy, is helping me. The music speaks to my soul though I have no pretentions of being able to play the instrument.

I am your heir, of course, and at some point will be master of an estate. That is to my credit.

Sincerely,

William Collins

Elizabeth looked up at her father, who, upon regarding her stunned visage, began shaking from suppressed laughter.

“Your expression, Lizzy, your expression!” he chortled.

Elizabeth smiled reluctantly and looked back down at the letter, “He is at least honest.”

“He is, he is! Delightfully blunt and refreshing, my dear. And I will be truthful, he is a far more appealing suitor than when he first darkened Longbourn’s doors. Far better to have a direct individual than a sycophantic, sniveling fool.”

“That it is, Father. It seems he is doing well at Pemberley. It is obvious that I was entirely wrong in my first assessment of Mr. Darcy. He is an extremely kind man to take care of Mr. Collins, who is no relation at all, nor is our cousin of the upper classes.”

This caused Mr. Bennet to sober immediately, “That is true, Lizzy. It is very good of Mr. Darcy indeed. Mr. Collins would not have done well in our household, I think; based on previous letters, he needs quiet and peace, and our home provides neither of those things.”

Elizabeth sighed, “That is true enough. Poor Mr. Collins. This last year must have been thoroughly unsettling to him.”

“It seems that his true character was hidden under his former foolish persona. It is far better now that he can access that brilliance and bluntness.”

“Yes, but still, he has experienced such massive changes in short order. It must be very unnerving.”

“True. But let us return to the question of the letter. What think you of being the new Mrs. Collins?”

Elizabeth frowned, “It would not do for me, Father. I respect Mr. Collins’s brilliance but I do wish for a match of true affection. I honor him for his straightforward claim that it would not be a love match.”

“Yes, I agree that you require more than mere brilliance in a mate. I wonder about Mary, perhaps?”

Elizabeth considered silently for several minutes.

“Perhaps?” she said doubtfully. “Mary is certainly very diligent in her studies and she and Mr. Collins might well enjoy discussions on mutual topics of interest. My perception is that Mary would not be adept at managing Mr. Collins in the way he needs. But perhaps

that is ungracious of me. We should certainly ask her opinion on the matter."

Her father nodded gravely, "Yes, I agree. It seems Mr. Collins will require a woman who is able to manage his household. Mary is certainly capable of focusing her attention on learning such things and she does not require a love match, but I am not certain she would enjoy such a life. Lydia and Kitty, of course, would scoff at the very idea of marrying a practical, pudgy clergyman, especially a genius."

"I do have an idea of someone who might be an ideal wife for Mr. Collins," Elizabeth mused. "Charlotte Lucas. She has a more practical view of marriage than I, and at this point, at seven and twenty, is discouraged about her options. I think she would manage Mr. Collins's complex issues very well. Of course, if she wed Mr. Collins, Longbourn would be lost to the Bennet family forever."

Mr. Bennet shook his head vigorously, "My dear Elizabeth, I am well aware that I am an indolent father but if there is one thing I wish for you girls, it is that you marry a compatible mate. I would be more concerned if Jane were still unwed, but Mr. Bingley is a thoroughly kindly man and if I die tomorrow,

I trust him to take care of you girls and your mother. There is no need for any of you to rush into marriage with a man with whom you are not well suited. By all means, ask Charlotte Lucas about whether she wishes to enter the sweepstakes to become the new Mrs. Collins."

"Father," Elizabeth murmured with a reproving smile. "If Mary and Charlotte are to go, how will they travel to Pemberley? They will need a male escort."

"Oh, if this journey comes to pass, I will accompany them myself, and you will come too, dear Elizabeth. I dislike leaving home, but the library at Pemberley sounds worthy of the greatest effort."

"Me? I am not going to marry Mr. Collins!"

"I know, Lizzy, but both Charlotte and Mary would no doubt appreciate your presence as a friend and sister, respectively. Would you not like to observe the glories of Derbyshire and the splendor of the Pemberley library?"

"But surely I cannot invite myself along without an invitation, Father! That would be the height of incivility."

“I have been in languid correspondence with Mr. Darcy these last months, my dear; he has been keeping me apprised of Mr. Collins’s progress. I will ensure that all the civilities are observed, I promise you.”

Chapter 13

June 10th, 1812

"Mr. Darcy, a carriage is approaching the house."

"Thank you, Wilton," Darcy said to his footman. "I will be along in a minute."

"Yes, sir."

Darcy quickly inscribed his signature on the letter to his man of business in London and rose to his feet to welcome his guests upon their arrival. He paused briefly by the door to regard himself in the mirror. His clothing was understated and elegant as usual, and his face looked calmer than he felt. Actually, he was wearing what Georgiana called his "forbidding expression". He practiced a slight smile and was pleased with the results. He must be appropriately welcoming to his guests but not overeager.

His guests.

Miss Elizabeth Bennet, her sister Mary, her father Mr. Bennet and Miss Charlotte Lucas were just arriving for a several week visit to Pemberley.

On one hand, this was madness. He was trying to forget Miss Bennet, and given that goal, bringing her to Pemberley seemed the very worst of decisions. On the other hand, nothing else was working. He had left Hertfordshire determined to put the young lady with her fine eyes out of his mind, and had failed miserably. He still imagined her walking the great halls of Pemberley, still envisioned her seated side by side at the pianoforte with Georgiana playing duets and singing.

No, allowing Miss Bennet to visit would be the quickest way to move past his absurd passion. Surely once he saw her in his home, her unsuitability would shine through. He would, of course, be the consummate host, but he would merely talk courteously and observe, and his soul would calm back to its normal placid state.

He exited through the main door of Pemberley and hurried down the steps as the carriage from Longbourn came to a halt. The door opened and Mr. Bennet emerged with a friendly nod; the man turned and handed out Miss Bennet, Miss Mary and Miss Lucas.

“Welcome to Pemberley,” Darcy said with a polite bow. Yes, that was the right tone;

pleasant, but vaguely indifferent, polite, but not fulsome.

"Mr. Darcy, thank you for welcoming us to your home," Mr. Bennet replied with his own bow.

"Yes, we are very grateful, Mr. Darcy," Elizabeth added with a quick curtsey and an awed glance, not at the house, but at the lands surrounding the mansion. "I have never seen a place where nature has done more. You must be exceptionally proud of Pemberley and her lands."

His heart lurched within him and he found himself responding warmly, "I am, Miss Bennet. I love Pemberley and her lands and her people. I have a house in London, of course, but Pemberley will always be my true home. But come, you must be desirous of freshening up. I will introduce you to my housekeeper, Mrs. Reynolds, and perhaps we can meet in the drawing room in an hour? I wish to introduce you to my sister, Miss Darcy, and of course you wish to speak to Mr. Collins."

"That sounds delightful, Mr. Darcy," Miss Lucas said politely.

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"Miss Lucas, of course I remember you," Mr. Collins said with enthusiasm. "Are you interested in possibly becoming my wife?"

Miss Mary choked and Miss Lucas looked briefly astonished before a hint of a smile appeared on her rather plain face, "I confess that I am, Mr. Collins."

Collins turned his attention on Mary, who was blushing, "I apologize, Miss Mary; I am aware that my skills regarding proper etiquette are nearly non-existent. I need to read more about such things, but I fear that other, more palatable books have distracted me far too many times. I mean no insult to any of you."

"That is quite all right," Mary replied, though she still looked uneasy.

"Miss Elizabeth, I understand that you have no desire to become my wife?" Collins continued.

Elizabeth looked up from her quiet discussion with Miss Darcy and smiled, "Yes, sir. I will match bluntness with bluntness; I desire a match based on mutual affection and thus I do not believe we would suit."

“I approve of your honesty most heartily, Cousin Elizabeth,” Collins declared. “Miss Mary, I am not adept at reading expressions so I must ask; are you disgusted with my peculiarities?”

Mary’s eyes widened and she glanced in horror at her father, who had been watching the unfolding conversation with amused amazement.

“Mr. Collins, you are certainly unsettling my daughter,” he interpolated kindly. “Perhaps I might facilitate a discussion between you, my daughter Mary, and Miss Lucas?”

“That would be most kind, sir!”

Darcy listened to the ensuing conversation for a few minutes and was both surprised and impressed by Mr. Bennet. He knew the man to be well read, but it appeared that when he cared to take the time, he was verbally adept as well. It seemed that Darcy could safely turn his attention to his sister, who was seated near Elizabeth.

When he did so, he found both ladies rising to their feet, and Elizabeth’s beautiful face glowing with enthusiasm. Georgiana, in turn, looked far more relaxed in Miss Bennet’s

company than Darcy thought possible after only just being introduced.

"Fitzwilliam, I am going to escort Miss Bennet to Mama's rose garden. Our guest loves roses and the June varieties are at their very best now. Would you care to join us?"

"I would," he said immediately, stepping forward eagerly to extend both arms to the ladies. Georgiana and Elizabeth immediately took one arm each and they walked out of the drawing room, through a series of oak paneled halls, and passed through the eastern door which led into the Lady Anne's rose garden.

"Oh!" Elizabeth breathed in excitement as they halted on the mosaic circle which formed the center of the garden. "Mr. Darcy, Miss Darcy, these are the most astonishing roses I have ever seen!"

"Thank you, Miss Bennet," Georgiana exclaimed with delight, releasing Darcy's arm and moving quickly along one of the paths which extended out from the center. "Please, let me show you the Blush Damasks, which are the finest I have ever seen. Mrs. Reynolds tells me that my mother loved them."

Miss Bennet, with a smile at Darcy, tripped quickly after Georgiana. Darcy trailed

along behind them, feeling a strange aching loss at the removal of that small hand from his arm.

"Oh, Miss Darcy, they are absolutely lovely!" Elizabeth agreed, leaning forward to smell one particularly fine bloom. "I have never seen their like!"

"Lady Anne spent many hours in this garden," Darcy said, looking around fondly. "I was only fourteen years of age when she passed on, so I must have been ten or eleven when we spent hours here working on the plants together, tending and pruning them. We have a full staff of gardeners, of course, who are responsible for keeping the rose garden tended now; when my mother was alive and in full health, she insisted on getting her own hands in the soil."

Miss Bennet was gazing at him gravely and he frowned a little at her sober demeanor. What had he said?

"Miss Darcy, you must have been young when you lost Lady Anne," she said, turning towards the girl.

Georgiana nodded sadly but did not blanch, "I was but four years of age, Miss Bennet. I only have the barest fragments of

memory of my mother."

"I am so very sorry. I cannot imagine, and I know you have since lost your father as well."

"Yes, six years ago, when I was ten years old. It is difficult," the girl agreed as she glanced at Darcy, "but my brother has been a wonderful guardian."

Darcy concealed a wince at this. He had failed rather spectacularly to protect Georgie from Wickham. It was only by the grace of God that he had prevented his sister's elopement with that foul fiend.

"I know he is a most attentive and caring brother," Miss Bennet agreed sincerely. "While I have you both here, I also wish to express my gratitude – indeed, our family's gratitude – for your kindness toward Mr. Collins. It is obvious that he is thriving here at Pemberley and there are few places on earth, perhaps, so perfect for a man in his position. My father says he waxes eloquent about the glories of the Pemberley library every time he writes."

"It has been an honor," Darcy replied truthfully. "I consider myself an intelligent, well-educated man, but I believe that Mr. Collins has a mind that only appears a few

times in a generation. His ability to recall information is astounding enough, but he has a remarkable ability to distill information into a reasonable form and connect it to other, only remotely related data. I am aware that he has developed a correspondence with a number of the finer minds in England, and feel privileged to have him as our guest."

"I appreciate that he is so forthright," Georgiana chimed in unexpectedly. "I have been to finishing school, Miss Bennet, to prepare for my coming out. It seems that much of the conversation in the ton is a matter of veiled innuendos and subtle indications. I am rather shy by nature and am nervous when faced with unspoken undercurrents in conversation with others. With Mr. Collins, I always know what he is truly thinking."

"He is certainly blunt," Elizabeth agreed with a crease in her brow. "I hope that he does not distress you with his direct speech on, for example, the topic of Lady Catherine de Bourgh."

The two siblings exchanged amused glances and Georgiana actually chuckled, "Not at all, Miss Bennet. My aunt terrifies me, to be entirely honest, and your cousin's very direct assessment of her overbearing personality is

extremely refreshing. Regarding most people, Mr. Collins is plain-spoken but generous. I appreciate that he does not lord his superior intellectual abilities over us lesser mortals. Indeed, he comments often how much he enjoys my playing the pianoforte."

"I understand you are tremendously adept in that arena, Miss Darcy."

The girl blushed at this and Darcy said, fondly, "She is truly excellent, Miss Bennet, thanks to natural talent and great devotion to her practicing. Perhaps you and she can play duets together during your stay at Pemberley."

"Well, as to that, I am sure I will be found wanting, Mr. Darcy, but of course I will perform if you wish. Miss Darcy, I fear that I do not practice as much as I ought; I enjoy walking the paths of my home county and reading books too much."

"I found you a most enjoyable performer," Darcy said truthfully.

Chapter 14

It was late evening and Georgiana was in her private sitting room attached to her bedchamber. It was a light and airy room, painted in soft blue with navy carpeting. The curtains and furniture were made up with pink damask decorated with roses, providing a charming contrast to the blues. The setting sun sent rays of golden light through the west facing windows, making his blonde sister look like an angel.

"Are you well, Georgiana?" Darcy asked softly.

Georgiana jerked slightly at his words and looked up at him from her chair, where her quiet hands held embroidery.

"I am well, Fitzwilliam," she replied, her expression one of a startled fawn. "I am sorry for my inattention; I was wool gathering."

"Of what were you thinking?" Darcy asked with some trepidation. It had been an odd day and while he had enjoyed it thoroughly, he wondered if his gentle sister was somewhat overwhelmed by their new guests.

“I was thinking how pleasant the day was,” she replied, quieting his fears. “The Bennets and Miss Lucas are enjoyable visitors.”

“I am glad you think so, Georgiana. I know that you find new acquaintances challenging at times.”

“The only member of the family that I find a little unsettling is Mr. Bennet. He makes statements that sound like they mean one thing, but I believe mean another?”

“Yes, he has a satirical wit. I am sorry it makes you uncomfortable.”

“I am not uncomfortable precisely, just bewildered. I far prefer Mr. Bennet to Miss Bingley.”

Darcy blinked at this in some astonishment, “Do you? I thought you considered Miss Bingley a friend.”

Georgiana bit her lip and said nothing, though her hands began busying themselves with the embroidery.

He sat down near her and gazed at her unhappily. He loved Georgiana dearly and thought they were reasonably close, but he often did not know how to draw her out of her shell when the discussion was a difficult one.

“It is quite all right if you do not like Miss Bingley,” Darcy continued in a soft voice.

For another minute, the girl focused on the needle and thread and then she stopped and looked up.

“Miss Bingley and her sister, Mrs. Hurst, can be quite pleasant companions when they choose to be,” she said unhappily, “but they both like to gossip about other people in a thoroughly vicious way. Besides, neither of them cares about me, not truly. They merely pretend to be my friend in the hopes that you would marry Miss Bingley.”

Darcy was metaphorically rocked back on his heels. He had thought that Bingley’s sisters truly cared about his gentle sister but it was suddenly completely obvious that Georgiana was right. Both women were inveterate social climbers and, thinking back, he could not remember one true example of actual goodness in them. Miss Bingley was a consummate hostess, but that was because she wished to shine in society; she was not truly interested in the comfort and well-being of her guests.

“I am sorry, Georgiana,” he said finally. “I thought they were pleasant companions to

you."

His sister shrugged, "It does not matter a great deal, Fitzwilliam. I suppose part of being a young lady of society is learning to interact well with spiteful women."

He nodded reluctantly, "That is true, though I wish I could shield you from such things. In any case I am thankful you enjoy the company of your new acquaintances."

"Miss Bennet is so comfortable," Georgiana exclaimed, her face lighting up. "I felt within a few minutes of our acquaintance that she was like an old friend, and she was wonderfully sympathetic about our mother. I know many people think I do not care about Mother since she died when I was very young, but I do miss her, Fitzwilliam."

"I know you do, my dear," Darcy said softly.

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Elizabeth stood at the top of the hill some half a mile to the north of the great mansion of Pemberley. It was only ten in the morning, but the sun was already hot

overhead. Mr. Darcy had offered to escort his guests to the nearby prominence to inspect Pemberley's lands, and Elizabeth, Mary and Charlotte had leaped at the chance. Mr. Collins had accompanied them, but Mr. Bennet had chosen to sequester himself in the library while Miss Darcy was in the midst of a French lesson.

"All of this is Pemberley land?" Elizabeth inquired in awe, slowly spinning around to inspect the glorious views. To the north were vast forests, to the east and west were tidy fields with grains growing and flourishing, to the south, the mansion itself and the home farm in all its prolific glory.

"Yes," Darcy stated with pride in his voice. "Pemberley's land extends in all directions, and the deer park itself is some 600 acres. There are also dozens of tenants who lease their land from the estate."

"Do you intend to marry your cousin, Miss Anne de Bourgh?" Mr. Collins inquired curiously.

Mary Bennet choked in astonishment at this impertinent question while Miss Lucas looked slightly taken aback and Miss Elizabeth amused.

“No, I do not,” Darcy said after a moment to collect himself. Such a question was entirely improper, but Mr. Collins obviously did not mean to cause offense.

Collins heaved a gusty sigh, “I am most relieved to hear that, Mr. Darcy. My belief is that Pemberley is actually too large at present. You are managing it very dexterously, but you are a highly intelligent and diligent man. I find it doubtful that your hypothetical son will do as well. When I contemplate the joining of Rosings and Pemberley, one estate in Kent and the other in Derbyshire, my heart misgives me.”

“There are excellent stewards,” Elizabeth pointed out. “Mr. Darcy would not need to live at Rosings, or Pemberley for that matter.”

“It is not quite the same,” Collins replied with a disapproving shake of the head. “Furthermore, Miss de Bourgh is a fragile woman. She really ought not to attempt to bear children, at least until her health improves significantly.”

Darcy winced at this comment and then his eyes fell on Miss Elizabeth. Her eyes were flashing, not with outrage, but with humor. She smiled at him and he back at her, and he

relaxed.

"I do not know what my cousin's future marriage plans are," Darcy said in a repressive tone, "but I have no intention of wedding her in order to unite the estates. As you say, Pemberley is quite enough for me."

"Longbourn, of course, is a far smaller estate," Miss Lucas said quietly. "Mr. Collins, perhaps you would care to ask your cousins about some of the details of the Longbourn tenantry? Unless, that is, you understand all the myriad issues already."

"No, no, Miss Lucas, you are quite right. Miss Bennet, Miss Mary, can you tell me whether the tenants use the Tullian drill? And are the leases long or short? Or a mixture of the two?"

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Mr. Bennet walked quietly down the hall, his usually staid heart thumping in anticipation. He had spent much of yesterday wandering the library of Pemberley, so overwhelmed at the number of books that he found himself flitting from one section to another without settling on any book in

particular. This morning, he had woken early while the sun was just peeping above the horizon. Breakfast was several hours away, and Mr. Bennet intended to use those hours to read one of the rare books on the man's shelves.

He smiled as he stepped into the great room and glanced around its walls, all fitted from floor to ceiling with shelves containing books from across the ages. He had been prepared for a magnificent collection based on Mr. Collins's raptures, but Mr. Darcy's library was even more incredible than he had imagined.

There was a soft sob from near the window and Bennet froze in astonishment and distress. He was not alone! Furthermore, the sob was that of a woman, which meant he was in the presence of a distressed female. Was it not enough that he lived with, and was married to, an often distressed female? Surely it was too much that he had come across some hapless maid, no doubt crying over her betrayal by a stable boy.

He took a backwards step, intending to flee, when a feminine form stepped into view from behind a column and his eyes widened.

“Mary?”

“Father,” Mary replied, quickly wiping down her cheeks with a sodden handkerchief. “I am sorry, Father. I woke up early and could not bear to stay in bed. The library is so beautiful.”

Indolence battled with duty and somewhat to Bennet’s surprise, duty won.

“Come here, my dear,” he invited, reversing course and walking over to a red couch. He beckoned to his third daughter, who nervously joined him. “Come, sit down and tell me what is wrong.”

Mary sat down obediently and wrung her damp handkerchief in her hands, her face a mask of misery. Bennet waited patiently; Mary, at least, was not prone to hysterics, and thus something of great import must have happened though he could not imagine what.

“I do not wish to marry Mr. Collins,” she finally whispered.

“Then you need not,” Mr. Bennet replied in surprise. “I thought that was entirely clear, Mary. The purpose of the trip to Pemberley was to determine whether you and Mr. Collins are compatible; that and it was an opportunity to enjoy this truly splendid library. This room

alone is worth the trip."

This provoked a watery chuckle and Mary lifted her face to his, "Mother told me I must do everything possible to win an offer from Mr. Collins."

"Your mother," he began sharply, and then softened his tone at Mary's startled look, "your mother is afraid, but she need not be. Mr. Bingley and Jane are now married and Mr. Bingley is a kind and generous man. If I were to die today, overcome by the glories of this vast array of books, you would be well cared for. But your mother has agonized so long about the entail that it is a habit with her."

"It is more than that, Father. She wishes to stay at Longbourn after you ... you …"

"Mary, if it will help, I will inform your mother that I realized that you and Mr. Collins are incompatible. You are under age and thus must win my approval for such a match, and I forbid it."

Mary's face smoothed into calm and she relaxed, "And do you really believe that Mr. Collins and I are incompatible, Father? Or would that merely be a small deception to protect me from Mother's wrath?"

Bennet shook his head, "You truly are

not well suited. You are a studious and hard-working young woman, Mary, but you are still but nineteen. Mr. Collins is a remarkably complex individual with some significant peculiarities."

"That is exactly it, Father! He is so odd. I understand that he is brilliant but he says things that are quite unnerving, even insulting, and I do not know how to respond, much less smooth over any conversational hurdles. Yesterday, when we went out to look over the estate, he said the most incredible things to Mr. Darcy, right in our presence. Both Charlotte and Lizzy were entirely calm, but I was mortified! Charlotte managed to turn the conversation most gracefully but I do not know how to do such a thing without causing offense."

"Charlotte Lucas is eight years your senior, and thus has a great deal more experience with life. Be at peace, my dear. I would far rather you be happy and comfortable in your marriage than to be coping with a difficult husband, and Mr. Collins will be difficult in some respects. I appreciate him a great deal, but he is not a conventional man."

"Do you think he will realize that I do

not wish to marry him? I will feel very uncomfortable if he actually asks for my hand and I deny him. Mother will almost certainly find out …"

"No, no, no. That would not do at all. I think we need a more direct approach."

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Elizabeth took a bite of toast, swallowed it, and declared, "Mr. Collins, you are no doubt correct that the four course system of farm land management is preferable. It is important, however, to be patient with the tenantry. These are people, not merely living minds. They have their own prejudices, their own habits, their own, dare I say, peculiarities. Several of our older tenants insist on clinging to what they learned from their forebears, and for my father to insist on changes would be counterproductive."

Mr. Collins sighed, "It seem so foolish to me, Cousin Elizabeth, when the science is so clearly in favor of sowing clover instead of letting the soil lie fallow for a year. What think you, Mr. Darcy?"

Darcy, who had been gazing at

Elizabeth's lovely profile, coughed slightly and pulled his muddled wits together.

"I agree with Miss Bennet," he said gravely. "While scientific progress is admirable, we must keep in mind the needs of the tenant. Perhaps it is best for all if the master of the estate is up to date on scientific advancements and thus he can facilitate improvement as the tenants become open to it."

Elizabeth rewarded him with a grateful smile and then turned toward the door as Mr. Bennet and Mary walked inside the dining room.

Darcy and Mr. Collins rose to their feet and bowed.

"Miss Mary, Mr. Bennet," Darcy said politely. "I hope you are both well this morning?"

"We are well indeed," Mr. Bennet responded with equal courtesy. "Now, before we sit down to break our fast, Mary has something to say to Mr. Collins."

All turned their attention on Mary, who in turn spoke nervously to Mr. Collins, "Mr. Collins, my father and I discussed the matter this morning, and we have concluded that I

am not suited to be your wife. I wish you to know that."

Collins blinked at her, then nodded, "Thank you, Miss Mary. I appreciate your honesty. Miss Lucas?"

"Yes, Mr. Collins?" Charlotte Lucas returned, putting down her fork and devoting her full attention to the brilliant clergyman.

"Would you be willing to be my wife?"

"Yes, Mr. Collins, I would be honored."

"Thank you, Miss Lucas. I believe we will suit very well. May I please have some more tea?"

Chapter 15

"Come in," Charlotte Lucas called out, and displayed no surprise when Elizabeth Bennet stepped cautiously through the door into her sitting room. The midday meal had been served and since the day was very hot, the ladies had retired to their chambers to rest.

"I was expecting you, Lizzy," Charlotte said with a chuckle. "Please do sit down. I begged some cold water from an obliging maid. Would you like some?"

"Certainly," Elizabeth agreed, sitting down next to her friend and glancing around curiously. All the bedchambers for guests were pleasant ones and given the style in the rest of the mansion, Elizabeth guessed that they had been decorated by Lady Anne herself. The furnishings were elegant and understated, but none bore the marks of the current rage for Egyptian and classically themed rooms. This particular sitting room was a sea of soothing greens and blues, which suited Charlotte perfectly.

Elizabeth accepted the cup of cold

water and gazed intently at her friend, who gazed back.

After a full minute of silence, Charlotte chuckled, “Yes, Elizabeth, I am entirely confident about my decision to marry Mr. Collins.”

Elizabeth sighed, “My dear Charlotte, I wish you all health and happiness and I confess I *am* concerned. You do not know Mr. Collins well, and to accept his hand with such limited knowledge seems unwise. I realize, of course, that I paved the way for you to come to Pemberley to see whether you and Mr. Collins were compatible. But Charlotte, we have been here but a few days. I thought you and Mary would spend time with him over the course of weeks! I do not intend to disparage Mr. Collins in any way; he is undoubtedly an amazing individual and a worthy man, unlike his former persona. He was completely *impossible* before the ball at Netherfield. ”

“I would have accepted Mr. Collins’s hand in marriage before his fall,” Charlotte replied matter-of-factly.

“Surely not, Charlotte! He was an absurd, groveling fool!”

“He was also respectable, a clergyman,

heir to Longbourn and held a valuable living. I wish so much for a home of my own, for children. No, Elizabeth, I would not have hesitated. As it is, I truly consider myself the most blessed of women, for Mr. Collins is far more amazing a man that I dreamed I would wed."

Elizabeth frowned at this, "I do not pretend to understand your perspective, Charlotte, but now I am concerned about something else. What of the living in Kent? It seems unwise for you to return to Hunsford given Mr. Collins's reaction to Lady Catherine."

"I agree that it would not do at all. I hope that Mr. Collins would not react so poorly after months of recovery here at Pemberley, but he would doubtless insult Lady Catherine quite thoroughly, resulting in unpleasant verbal explosions from his patroness. No, Mr. Collins will give up the living in Kent and take one about ten miles from here in the small town of Bastow. Mr. Darcy has offered it to Mr. Collins as the current rector is 78 years of age and eager to retire."

"Is it a valuable living?"

“It is worth about 250 pounds a year, Elizabeth. That is not a great deal, but it will be enough, especially as Mr. Collins is writing for Sydney Smith now and will earn some money that way. Mr Darcy tells me that the glebe attached to the house is extensive, and next year we can have a large garden and chickens and perhaps a pig ...”

Elizabeth leaned forward and grasped her friend’s hands tightly, “You do look very happy, Charlotte, and I am happy for you.”

“I am happy for me too. Now, let us speak of you, Lizzy.”

“Me?”

“Yes. I am now engaged to a fine man. Should you not turn your attention to Mr. Darcy in the hopes of garnering an offer?”

Her friend blushed to the roots of her hair and jumped to her feet. She walked quickly over to the south facing window and stared out blankly.

“Lizzy?”

She turned around to face Charlotte, her face pinched, “Oh, do you not see, Charlotte? It is hopeless.”

“You love him?” Charlotte asked in

surprise.

Elizabeth shook her head and slowly resumed her place next to her friend.

“I am not in love with Mr. Darcy, no. I think, indeed, I am quite sure, that I could love Mr. Darcy if I let myself. But my dear friend, look around you! We are staying at Pemberley! Ten thousand pounds a year and a large estate in Derbyshire sounded very impressive when I heard of it in Meryton, but I had no idea what this estate was truly like. Mr. Darcy is nephew to an earl, handsome, intelligent and quite incredibly rich. He is destined to marry a wealthy woman with wonderful connections, not a poor gentleman’s daughter from the country.”

“Now that is not the Elizabeth that I love,” Charlotte commented disapprovingly. “You know your own worth, I hope. You are intelligent, handsome and a most committed daughter, sister and friend. Any man would be privileged to marry you.”

Elizabeth rubbed her forehead with an unquiet hand, “It is not that I … oh, Charlotte, I do not suffer from a lack of self-confidence. You know that! But Mr. Darcy has more than his own desires to consider in choosing a wife.

He has his sister's needs to take into account, and indeed his devotion to Miss Darcy is admirable! He has the future to consider for the sake of his children and indeed all of Pemberley. There are so many who depend on the Darcy family for their well-being; all the tenants and clergymen, all the people of Lambton who derive income from Darcy holdings. I just do not wish ..."

"To be disappointed? Now who is being ridiculously sensible, Eliza? You would, I think, be a wonderful match for Mr. Darcy. Perhaps he will not offer for you but then again, perhaps he will. I will say this, Elizabeth; he watches you a great deal. He did back in Hertfordshire, and he does here as well."

"Perhaps it is merely absence of mind?"

"If so, he could just as well look at his sister or Mr. Bennet. No, I truly believe there is admiration in his gaze."

"I cannot believe it. Nor will I humiliate myself or anyone else by throwing myself at Mr. Darcy as Miss Bingley did."

Charlotte laughed aloud at this, "Now *that* I know you would never do. But do give the man a chance, Elizabeth. I believe you

would be very well suited; perhaps you are correct and he feels obligated to make a match with a woman of fortune and connection, but then again, perhaps not."

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"Miss Mary?"

"Oh!" Mary cried out in astonishment and embarrassment. "I am so sorry, Miss Darcy ..."

"Not at all," the girl replied as she walked into the music room. "I know that you enjoy performing on the pianoforte and you are certainly welcome to play this one. My brother purchased it for me only eight months ago and it has a splendid tone and timbre."

Mary Bennet turned and looked down at the gleaming pianoforte with awe and a minor stab of envy. It was an absolutely glorious instrument, far better than the one at Longbourn.

"You are quite certain?" she asked Georgiana meekly. "I would not wish to prevent you from practicing."

"Not at all," her blonde hostess insisted.

“I have some new music and I wish to study the score. If you are willing to play, it will provide a delightful accompaniment.”

Mary smiled in gratitude and began looking through the music set on a nearby table, as Georgiana plucked several pieces of music from a drawer.

The third Bennet daughter had just selected a favorite piece when the door to the music room suddenly swung open, a man rushed through, and the door was closed quickly but quietly.

Both ladies froze in astonishment and mild alarm, and then Georgiana chuckled.

“Mr. Martyn?” she inquired.

The man in question turned toward the ladies, his blue eyes wide as saucers, “Miss Darcy, I am so very sorry for intruding on you! I apologize most profusely! I understood all the ladies were above stairs. I really am quite horrified. I will leave immediately!”

“That is quite all right, Mr. Martyn. Please do stay long enough to meet one of our guests.” Georgiana suggested. “Miss Mary, may I introduce Mr. Martyn, steward of the small estate where Mr. Collins will soon be serving as rector. Mr. Martyn is the younger

brother of one of Fitzwilliam's friends from Cambridge. He successfully studied law but prefers working as a steward than in a dusty law office. Is that not true, Mr. Martyn?"

"Indeed it is," Mr. Martyn replied fervently. "I was always following my father's steward around our family estate in Norfolk County. I am most grateful to Mr. Darcy for giving me the opportunity to learn from his steward here at Pemberley, and now I have been given employment at the Darcy estate at Bastow."

"Mr. Martyn is also a great favorite of our cook," Georgiana continued with a glance at the man's hand, where he was clutching a scone.

The man flushed even more but managed a bow toward Mary, who curtsied in return as she did a careful inspection of the intruder. He was a very tall man, even taller than Mr. Darcy, though very thin. She estimated he was some five and twenty years of age, and he sported a shock of very red hair.

"Mr. Martyn, it is very pleasant to meet you. Mr. Collins is one of my distant cousins."

"Oh, I see."

“Were you wishing to use the pianoforte?” Mary asked curiously. The young man seemed to be suffering some deep sense of embarrassment; perhaps he enjoyed playing the instrument, rarely had the opportunity, and had crept in here for some surreptitious playing time?

“No, no,” the young man replied, looking even more embarrassed. “No, the truth is, well, I heard Mr. Collins’s voice coming down the corridor and I was not ready to speak to him, so I fled in here hoping to avoid him. He is so intelligent, you see, and he always asks questions I cannot answer. I am quite fearful that he will think me a supreme idiot once he has moved to Bastow and we interact on a regular basis.”

Georgiana and Mary exchanged amused glances and Mary laughed, “I assure you that Mr. Collins makes us all feel quite foolish at times, Mr. Martyn. He is genuinely brilliant, is he not?”

“He is,” the man stated, his face relaxing. “He is incredibly gifted. Mr. Darcy is, of course, a very intelligent man but Mr. Collins is on a different plane.”

“We all feel that way at times, Mr.

Martyn," Georgiana said warmly. "I assure you, though, that Mr. Collins is an honorable and kindly man. He does not look down upon us poor mortals whose minds do not move with such great rapidity."

"I do apologize for intruding, Miss Darcy, Miss Mary. I should go out and, er ..."

"Brave my cousin?" Mary asked with amusement.

"Precisely. Miss Darcy, Miss Mary, I bid you good day."

He left as rapidly as he came, and Mary found herself staring after him. A minute later, she came out of her reverie and discovered Georgiana gazing at her curiously.

"He seems an interesting young man," Mary commented, rather awkwardly.

"Yes," Georgiana agreed, looking down at her music. "My brother thinks much of him, and Mr. Martyn may be the next steward of Pemberley when the current steward retires, though that is likely many years away. I know he seems uncertain, but he is most diligent, sensible and intelligent. I also feel at ease with him; he is friendly but respectful, kind but not fulsome. His father is a gentleman but not a wealthy one, and the estate and its limited

income will go to his older brother. Thus Mr. Martyn needs employment."

"Oh!" Mary replied thoughtfully.

Chapter 16

Elizabeth felt strangely unsettled. She had slept poorly the night before, waking at hourly intervals with her thoughts focused on Mr. Darcy.

The master of Pemberley was indeed handsome, intelligent and honorable. She had disdained him when first they met thanks to Mr. Darcy's unfortunate insult at the assembly the day they met. Then Mr. Wickham, vile Mr. Wickham, had poured his verbal poison into her regrettably willing ear.

Elizabeth knew better now. She knew that Mr. Darcy was all that was admirable. She was also, she realized, being something of a coward. She, Elizabeth Bennet, who prided herself on her courage rising with every attempt to intimidate her, had been frightened and awed by Pemberley's glories.

Well, no more. She did not believe that Mr. Darcy was in love with her; even less did she believe he would make her an offer. But he was a good man, the kind of man she was honored to call friend.

"How did this estate come into Darcy

possession, sir?" she asked aloud, gazing steadily (she hoped not boldly) at the gentleman in question. They were traveling to Bastow today so that Charlotte and Mr. Collins could inspect the parsonage they would soon make their home.

He was seated across from her in the carriage, his garments neat but restrained, his dark hair unruffled. Next to him was Mr. Collins and beside Elizabeth was Mary, who in turn sat next to Charlotte Lucas.

"My father acquired it some twenty years before his death," Darcy explained. "The former owner of the Bastow estate had mounting debts which resulted in the threat of foreclosure. My father purchased it as both a favor and because Bastow's lands have sufficiently different soil that we are able to grow apples and pears."

"That is very wise," Mr. Collins declared approvingly. "It is always sensible to diversify one's investments."

Elizabeth looked at Mr. Collins with fondness; her cousin would never be a handsome man with his rather plain face and portly body, but his expression was now alert and intelligent instead of cringing, and his

figure had improved in the last months. In addition to spending long hours devouring books in the library, he often went for vigorous walks through Pemberley lands.

"The country here is so wild," Mary mused, her eyes on the moving scenery. "I love the crags of Derbyshire. The country is so much wilder than Hertfordshire, but it is beautiful."

Elizabeth glanced at her sister in some surprise. Mary had always been devoted to books more than nature and had never shown much interest in the glories of the outdoors. On the other hand, it was true that the passing views were incredible. The hills in this region of Derbyshire were decorated with tall trees with patches of tall grasses interspersed between the copses.

"I love all of our fair country of England," Darcy replied with a smile lighting up his already handsome face, "but Derbyshire will always be my favorite. It will always be home."

"I believe this is the parsonage coming up," Charlotte Lucas commented. She had been largely silent during their two hour journey to Bastow, but her face was glowing

with joy. Elizabeth had rarely seen her in such good looks.

"Indeed it is," Darcy agreed. "I believe I mentioned this to Mr. Collins and Miss Lucas, but I should warn you as well, Miss Bennet and Miss Mary. The current vicar, Mr. Colborne, is elderly and has been struggling with some confusion of late. I believe it would be best if the steward of Bastow, Mr. Martyn, introduced Mr. Collins and Miss Lucas to Mr. Colborne while the rest of us remain outside for a least a short time. He would likely become distressed if too many unknown individuals come inside."

"That sounds very sensible," Elizabeth agreed, with Mary murmuring her assent.

The carriage came to a halt, and Mr. Darcy opened the carriage and climbed out. He helped Elizabeth and Mary onto the graveled walk in front of the parsonage. Mr. Collins also climbed out and gazed around with curiosity, only to be called gently to order by Charlotte, who smilingly extended her hand so that her fiancé would remember his duty toward her.

The clergyman nodded fondly as he helped her out, "Thank you, Miss Lucas. I need

such reminders."

"I know, Mr. Collins."

"Mr. Darcy!"

The man approaching them was but five and twenty years of age, tall, with very bright red hair. He could not possibly be the aging clergyman, and thus Elizabeth assumed he was the young steward of Bastow.

This turned out to be correct, but in the midst of the introductions and bows and curtsies, Elizabeth was astonished to discover that her sister Mary was blushing furiously.

How very odd.

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"How far does the glebe extend?" Elizabeth asked.

She, Mary and Mr. Darcy had walked behind the parsonage to allow Charlotte and Mr. Collins to meet with the aging rector.

"It is larger than is common," Darcy replied. "It extends to the tree line to the north and to the fences to the east and west. I think Mr. Collins and Miss Lucas will, after their

marriage, be well pleased with the possibilities here. I am concerned about the vicarage itself. Mr. Colborne has been somewhat reclusive these last years and reluctant to allow Mr. Martyn to inspect the building. I see signs of dry rot on these boards here. I will speak to Mr. Martyn to ensure that the parsonage is fully checked so any necessary repairs can be done."

"That is very good of you, Mr. Darcy," Elizabeth said sincerely.

He looked slightly uncomfortable, "It is my duty."

Elizabeth quickly glanced around and saw that Mary had wandered out of earshot of quiet voices, though she was still in view.

"If I may, sir, there are many gentlemen who do not take appropriate responsibility for their duties. You are a very diligent and generous landlord and master. If it were not for the fact that you dislike dancing so much, I daresay you would be quite perfect."

Her two sentences made him look increasingly uneasy but the last comment made him smile a little.

"I do not mind dancing with those I know well. Indeed, I hope that some day soon

I can dance with you, Miss Bennet."

This provoked a startled blush in the lady, and for a moment the man and the woman gazed into one another's eyes, both aware of the spark of attraction between them.

"I assume Mr. Colborne has not grown anything in this garden for several years," Mary stated, breaking the spell and causing Darcy and Elizabeth to draw back from one another with embarrassment.

"Er, no, no," the gentleman agreed. "No, I fear he has been deteriorating for some time and quite unable to manage gardening, nor was he interested in hiring a man for that task. It is regrettable he was not willing to retire earlier, but then again perhaps it was God's gift to us all that the living is currently available. I will relish having Mr. Collins and his family within easy distance of Pemberley."

"Mr. Martyn!" Mary suddenly cried out as the tall steward stepped out of the back door of the parsonage with Mr. Collins and Charlotte Lucas at his heels.

"Miss Mary!" the man replied enthusiastically. "What think you of Bastow?"

And Mary, staid Mary, who had disdained her younger sisters' foolish

infatuation of red coated officers, who prided herself on her calm approach to love and romance, felt her heart beating so hard that her chest felt like it might burst.

"I like Bastow very well," she responded, gazing up into the man's face. "I like it very well indeed."

Chapter 17

"I'll rub him down, sir," the stable boy assured Darcy, grasping the lead rope and guiding his white stallion, Perseus, down the central corridor of the great horse barn.

"Very good," Darcy replied absently, briskly brushing off the sleeves of his casual white shirt and sighing. He would definitely need a bath before he could sit down to dinner.

He strode out of the barn and into the beating sun of June. It was only two hours past noon, and the sweat ran freely under his clothing. Darcy quickened his step and opened the door into the conservatory where many delicate plants were kept safe during the cold Derbyshire winter. Right now most of the plants were outside, though the orange trees remained within at all times, tended with maternal care by the head gardener and his minions. There were also any number of potted plants displaying a profusion of flowers with the colors of the rainbow, all ready to be transplanted outside as needed. Thanks to the clever ventilation system, the conservatory

was noticeably cooler than outside, and Darcy heaved a sigh of relief.

He turned a corner and stopped in surprise. Naturally, at a time when he was far from looking his best, Miss Elizabeth was inside the conservatory.

Georgiana, Miss Lucas and Miss Mary were present as well, though he hardly saw them. Elizabeth was dressed in a simple yellow muslin dress and her dark hair was piled high, with a few artfully arranged ringlets falling across her forehead. She was lovely.

If he had only known it, he struck quite a fine figure himself. Elizabeth had long thought him a handsome man, but she had never seen him dressed so casually. In addition to being tall, he was a strong man and his arm muscles showed through the simple cotton shirt. Really, he had quite an impressive physique ...

Before Elizabeth's blushes could betray her, Georgiana Darcy spoke up.

"Brother!" the girl said merrily. "We are looking over the conservatory in preparation for the wedding breakfast for Mr. Collins and Miss Lucas. The head gardener has given us

permission to set up the tables here, though I could tell he was slightly uneasy at the prospect of a rampaging horde in his precious conservatory."

"I am most grateful, Mr. Darcy," Miss Lucas chimed in, looking slightly uncomfortable. "I assure you that a wedding breakfast here at Pemberley is not necessary …"

Darcy lifted a hand to stay her, "Not at all, Miss Lucas. It is our honor and pleasure. It has been too long since we have celebrated the joyful union of two friends in marriage."

"Fitzwilliam?" Georgiana asked suddenly, her nose wrinkling slightly. "Is that smell…?"

He felt a stab of embarrassment followed by reluctant amusement, "Indeed, my dear. The bull has struck again."

Georgie's pealing laughter ran out, and Darcy laughed with her, mostly with joy at seeing her so happy and carefree. It was amazing how quickly his shy sister had grown comfortable with their guests from Hertfordshire.

"There is a valuable bull on the home farm," Georgiana explained, turning to the

other ladies, “He is a healthy beast but is not pleased to be confined to his pen when his services are required.”

“Indeed he is not,” Darcy continued, taking up the story. “With monotonous regularity, he breaks free of his enclosure and makes off to the nearest field containing cows. Then we have to round him up, bring him back and repair the fence. Today, he led us on a merry chase through the field before we recaptured him. Hence, my person is somewhat more odiferous than usual. Given that, I will leave you to your consideration of flowers and the wedding breakfast. Ladies.”

He bowed to all, but especially to Elizabeth, and strode away with his mind dwelling on the lady’s bright eyes and vibrant countenance.

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“Miss Darcy is in the library, Mr. Darcy,” the butler informed him thirty minutes later, “along with the rest of our guests, sir.”

“Thank you,” Darcy replied, speeding up his pace. He had enjoyed a quick, cold bath

and was now clean and properly dressed.

He opened the library door to hear Elizabeth speak with startled accents.

“She was but thirteen years of age? Surely not, Mr. Collins!”

"*She hath not seen the change of fourteen years, Let two more summers wither in their pride, Ere we may think her ripe to be a bride,*" Mr. Collins quoted. “That is directly from the play, of course. Romeo’s age is not clearly designated, but Juliet is but a few weeks short of fourteen years of age in Shakespeare’s play.”

Elizabeth was seated on the couch next to Miss Lucas and Miss Mary, Mr. Bennet sat on a chair in the corner gazing on with interest, and Mr. Collins stood by the window overlooking them all. Georgiana was also present, curled up on a window seat overlooking the rose garden.

“Well, it is merely a play, of course,” Charlotte Lucas commented, “but that is really far too young to marry.”

“I agree,” Elizabeth stated decidedly as she smiled in welcome to Darcy. “I suppose it was for dramatic effect, but it seems it would have been far more sensible to place their ages

at seventeen and nineteen or something of the sort."

"I concur, Cousin Elizabeth," Mr. Collins said. "An interesting facet of their ages is that it makes, in my view, the Friar Lawrence who married them something of a villain, though that is not Shakespeare's intent."

"A villain, Mr. Collins?" Mr. Bennet inquired. "A wise and beneficent man of God? The results were tragic but surely he sought a good thing in trying to end the feud between the families of Romeo and Juliet. He also desired, most nobly, to help two young lovers who were being thwarted in their love through foolish family enmity."

"Their love, if you choose to call it that, was based on but a short acquaintance, sir," Mr. Collins retorted. "They hardly knew one another. Furthermore, to abet the marriage of a mere child, for that is what Juliet was, in opposition to the wishes of that child's parents is an arrogant and dangerous act. No, it is, as Cousin Elizabeth said, merely a play and thus we must not read too much into its themes of love, but the friar's encouragement was both unwise and ungodly."

"Do you not believe in love at first sight,

Mr. Collins?" Mary Bennet asked, rather to Darcy's surprise.

"I am hardly an expert on such a thing," the man demurred. "I have intellectual views on the subject, but not emotional ones."

"By all means share your intellectual views on love then, Mr. Collins," Bennet suggested, his eyes alight with amusement.

Darcy walked over to his sister and sank down next to her, placing his long arm around her shoulders. This was a challenging subject, to be sure, and he was slightly uncertain as to whether Georgie should be present when the very plainspoken Collins held forth. However, he could guide her out the side door of the library into the study as needed.

Collins stared at the gold and red Persian rug for a long moment and then lifted his head to gaze around the room at the various individuals present.

"Love is a gift from the Lord Himself," he proclaimed. "There are different kinds of love; brotherly love, selfless love, passionate love. But when one is considering marriage, I believe the heart and the mind must work together. To love with the heart is a great gift, but to let the heart alone lead, as Romeo and

Juliet did, is to invite destruction."

"You propose a sensible sort of love, then?" Elizabeth inquired thoughtfully.

"I believe that passion and emotion have their places, even if I do not feel those things towards Miss Lucas. I am fond of her and I hope she will find herself fond of me. Perhaps with time, our mutual respect and admiration will deepen into something more. But to let mere emotion, infatuation, to guide one is to walk a dangerous road. I will add, however, that to depend entirely on intellectual or practical considerations can lead to disaster as well. If a man and woman marry for entirely pragmatic reasons and disdain or despise one another, that is a tragedy for husband, wife and children. Our own Prince Regent married his cousin because of pressure from the King and Queen, and the results have been most regrettable; the Regent and Princess of Wales have been at odds since the beginning of their marriage. Indeed, their fractious union has led to a most unfortunate result; do you realize that but one life, that of the Regent's daughter, Princess Charlotte, stands between a stable monarchy and a succession crisis? The princess is the only legitimate grandchild of our current king. How much better it would

have been if the two had been able to determine their compatibility before they wed and thus were a loving couple with more than one child. ”

There were soft sighs of agreement and Darcy spoke up, “It is sad, but monarchs generally arrange marriages for dynastic and political reasons. It is the way of things.”

“But perhaps it should *not* be the way of things,” Elizabeth mused thoughtfully, her eyes fixed on a portrait of Darcy’s mother which hung on the wall.

“I agree,” Darcy replied softly, his eyes following hers. His parents’ marriage had faced its shares of struggles, particularly with Lady Anne’s health, but they had loved one another dearly.

“The most important consideration,” Collins pronounced, “is for a man and woman to determine whether they can serve God together in whatever capacity is their lot in life. You, Mr. Darcy, ought to marry an intelligent woman since you are yourself a clever man. She should also be a woman who is focused not on your position in society and your wealth, but on her desire to devote herself to her role as wife and helpmeet as you

care for your vast estate. I would add that ideally the young woman would be healthy enough to bear you an heir. In my case, I have great intelligence but difficulty in relating well to people; Miss Lucas is my perfect match in that she is practical, kind and content to marry a man with my limitations."

"And what of monetary considerations, Mr. Collins?" Bennet asked seriously. "Surely you are not suggesting that money is of no importance?"

"It is, of course. Everyone must eat and wear clothing and have a roof over one's heads. I daresay there is little more heart wrenching than parents who find themselves unable to provide their children with the basic necessities of life. But our Lord also has plenty of warnings about being very wealthy, as riches have their own temptations. Money is important, but seeking wealth and connections over compatibility and affection is the road to sorrow, or at least so I believe."

Elizabeth found herself looking at Darcy, who in turn was gazing at the picture which had caught her interest a few minutes ago. Based on the lady's resemblance to Miss Darcy, the portrait was almost certainly of the Lady Anne.

Miss Darcy was looking down at the floor biting her lip, and she rose now and walked quickly out of the room, her face downcast. Elizabeth frowned at Mr. Darcy, but the gentleman did not seem to have noticed his sister's distress. Elizabeth rose and followed Miss Darcy out of the room.

"Charlotte," Mary murmured into her friend's ear.

"Yes?"

"May I talk to you privately?"

Charlotte looked at her in surprise but nodded, and both ladies rose, curtsied and left the room.

Darcy was staring at his mother's portrait. His parents had loved one another. Yes, Lady Anne had been highly born as the daughter of an earl, and George Darcy immensely wealthy, but they had married due to affection, not merely for money and connections.

He had been fighting his attraction to Elizabeth Bennet for months and what was the result? He was more in love with her every single day.

Why was he battling his own desires? Miss Bennet – Elizabeth – was beautiful,

intelligent, kind and yes, healthy. She would be his perfect mate. She would be a loving sister to Georgiana and a benevolent mistress to the many people who depended on Pemberley for their well-being.

"Mr Bennet?"

"Yes, Mr. Darcy?"

"May I speak to you in my office on a private matter?"

Bennet looked surprised but rose to his feet, "Of course, Mr. Darcy."

The two men exited, leaving Mr. Collins quite alone.

"Hmmm," Collins murmured to himself, and wandered over to a shelf in search of a book.

Chapter 18

Elizabeth followed Miss Darcy outside and into a far corner of the elaborate rose garden. The blonde girl was seated on a simple wooden bench, and her face was red, her eyes puffy with unshed tears.

Elizabeth halted, suddenly feeling horribly awkward.

“I am sorry, Miss Darcy,” she said contritely as the girl lifted her face. “I did not mean to intrude.”

“No, I am thankful that you are here. Please, will you not join me?”

Elizabeth sat down next to Georgiana and waited patiently. A full minute passed while Miss Darcy played with ribbons on her gown.

“A year ago,” the girl finally said, “I thought I was in love. I was only fifteen years of age at the time, on holiday at Ramsgate by the sea, and a man I had known since my childhood was there as well. We met, and he … well, I thought he loved me. I certainly believed that I loved him. But he was only

after my dowry, Miss Bennet. He convinced me to elope with him to Scotland, but thankfully Fitzwilliam came only a day before our planned trip, and thus I was saved from a lifetime of regret."

Elizabeth impulsively laid a comforting hand on the girl's arm, "I am so sorry. How old was the man?"

"Twenty-seven years of age at the time. He is my brother's age."

"That is truly horrible that a mature man would do such a thing, Miss Darcy," Elizabeth said warmly. "You were, like Juliet, very young, far too young to think of marriage. He clearly sought to take advantage of your youth and inexperience in the ways of the heart."

Georgiana let out a long breath of air and turned slightly to look straight into Elizabeth's eyes, "Yes, I was very young and foolish but it is true I am still ... still not fully grown. I have felt so guilty for so long over my actions, but truly it was more Mr. Wickham's fault ..."

"Mr. Wickham!"

The girl froze at Elizabeth's cry and her eyes flared wide, "Do you know him, Miss Bennet? Did my brother tell you ...?"

“Mr. Darcy told me nothing about your situation, Miss Darcy, I assure you,” Elizabeth replied, her breath coming quickly. “I do know Mr. Wickham. He was a lieutenant in the militia in Meryton last fall, though he disappeared some months ago. What a vile man to take advantage of you, Miss Darcy!”

“Please,” the girl said impulsively, “call me Georgiana. I am baring my soul to you, after all, Miss Bennet.”

“Well, you must call me Elizabeth then,” Elizabeth replied decidedly. “My dear Georgiana, I am so very grieved that that foul man plotted against you. I was taken in myself by his charming manners, but have since learned that he left debts and at least one ruined woman behind him.”

“I wonder where he has gone,” Georgiana murmured with a furrowed brow. “I hope that he will not reappear to cause trouble in the future.”

“Mr. Wickham disappeared from Meryton under rather unusual circumstances,” Elizabeth commented. “I wonder if Mr. Darcy might have been involved in some way.”

The girl sighed, “I doubt it, but I will ask him. My brother has always been worried

about my reputation, you see, and thus did not move against Mr. Wickham at Ramsgate, or Mrs. Younge, for that matter."

"Mrs. Younge?"

"She was my paid companion but she was in league with Mr. Wickham. They had a prior acquaintance and intended to divide my dowry in some way after our elopement and marriage."

Elizabeth shook her head as she tightened her hand on the girl's arm, "So your companion, whom you thought you could trust, was in league with a childhood friend to entice you into a forbidden marriage. My dear girl, you were faced with a most difficult situation and truly, you were not at fault. It was Mr. Wickham and this Mrs. Younge who deserve the blame."

"My poor brother," Georgiana murmured sadly. "I know he felt absolutely wretched about the entire affair since it was he who chose Mrs. Younge as my companion. He also did not tell me of ... of Mr. Wickham's perfidious behavior these last years, as he did not wish to ruin my good memories from childhood. It has been good to see Fitzwilliam laugh so much since you have come to visit.

You have been a delightful guest, Elizabeth."

Elizabeth blushed at this, pleasure mixed with shame. When she considered how she had once championed George Wickham ...

"It has been a great joy to be here, Georgiana."

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"You are in love with a steward, Mary?" Charlotte Lucas asked doubtfully.

Mary paced up and down the sitting room attached to her bedchamber and sighed, "Mr. Collins would say, and no doubt he is right, that it is merely infatuation. Oh, but Charlotte, I have never felt anything like this before in my life! I just feel this ... this connection with Mr. Martyn. I do not know what to do!"

Charlotte sat down on the tan couch and patted the spot next to her, "Sit down, Mary."

Mary obeyed, though she kept her gaze on the wall in front of her.

"I have always been very practical about marriage," Charlotte proclaimed, and then caught herself. "Perhaps that is not true at

that, Mary. When I was seventeen or eighteen years of age, I hoped for more than a good home and a compatible mate. I suppose I had some girlish fantasies that a handsome man of good fortune would sweep me off my feet. But at my age, of course, I am far more pragmatic and indeed I am overjoyed that I have won Mr. Collins. Mary, I ... I appreciate the idea of emotional love in a match, but a steward? He is not eligible. You must see that."

Mary turned toward her friend and frowned, "He is the younger son of a gentleman, Charlotte. His elder brother, the heir to the family estate, is a good friend of Mr. Darcy's."

"Is he indeed? Did he tell you this?"

"No, Miss Darcy did. I met Mr. Martyn in the music room here at Pemberley, you see, and I came along to Bastow so I could see him again. Oh Charlotte, he is not conventionally handsome, but he is such a lively man, such an enthusiastic, honest person. Miss Darcy says Mr. Darcy is very pleased with him, and that Mr. Martyn will likely be the next steward of Pemberley when the current man retires. I know it is foolish, but if I return to Longbourn, I fear I will pine for him the rest of my life!"

Charlotte Lucas suppressed an astonished chuckle. She would have not been surprised to have such a conversation with her sister, Maria, or Kitty or Lydia Bennet, but Mary? Life was full of surprises.

"It is true that as Mr. Martyn is a gentleman's son, he is at least eligible. Would you like to stay in the parsonage at Bastow with us after Mr. Collins and I are wed?" she offered. "I am certain we will see much of Mr. Martyn and thus you will have an opportunity to further your acquaintance. I truthfully anticipate that your initial enthusiasm for the man will fade with time, nor is there any certainty that Mr. Martyn feels similar things about you."

Mary straightened eagerly, "Oh Charlotte, are you certain? I would like that above all things! But surely you do not wish for me to be visiting so soon after your marriage?"

"I would be delighted," the other woman asserted. "I would greatly enjoy your company. Of course, you will need to obtain your father's permission but yes, I would most appreciate your presence in my new home, and I know Mr. Collins will be entirely pleased with such a prospect."

Mary's eyes filled with tears, "Thank you, Charlotte. Thank you."

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"I am in love with Miss Bennet and wish to marry her," Darcy stated baldly.

Mr. Bennet, who had been distracted by the copious number of unfamiliar books in Darcy's office, coughed at this sudden announcement.

"Er, Elizabeth?"

Darcy blinked and gestured for the man to sit down, "Yes, sir."

Elizabeth's father stared at Darcy for a long moment and then sat down slowly, his face sagging.

This was not the response that Darcy expected in the least. He was Fitzwilliam Darcy, owner of the vast estate of Pemberley with an income of 10,000 pounds a year. He had been sought out as one of the premier matches of high society for many years now.

"Is there a problem, sir?" he inquired, struggling to keep his tone calm.

Bennet shook his head, “No, no, Mr. Darcy. I apologize. I dearly love Elizabeth, and I admit it is a shock to hear of your interest in her, to realize I may lose her soon. I believe you and she would deal remarkably well but I confess I had no idea you were preparing to make an offer to her. None at all. I suppose that is my penance for focusing more on books then people during this visit.”

Darcy hesitated, but decided on honesty, “I was greatly attracted to Miss Bennet in Hertfordshire, Mr. Bennet. Since she arrived here, the strength of my adoration has only strengthened. I confess that I had foolishly focused on the necessity of wedding a high society woman with connections, but Mr. Collins’s remarks in the library only minutes ago helped open my eyes.”

Bennet frowned at this, “While I understand your concerns, Mr. Darcy, I must ask this; will you hold it against Elizabeth that her mother is the daughter of a tradesman and vulgar to boot? Will you look down on my daughter for her lack of connections and dowry? If so, I cannot give you my blessing.”

Darcy shook his head decidedly, “If Miss Bennet honors me with her hand in marriage, I can only be thankful. She is a remarkable

woman."

"She is," his potential father-in-law agreed, "and I assure you that if she does not love you, she will refuse your offer. Do you believe that she loves you, Mr. Darcy?"

The master of Pemberley stared in shock. Elizabeth might refuse him? Surely not. He was rich, handsome, intelligent and incredibly eligible. But then, she had made it entirely clear she would not have accepted Mr. Collins, who was also most acceptable as a suitor. And surely her father knew her better than he did.

"I do not know," he admitted weakly.

"Then I suggest you tread softly, Mr. Darcy," Mr. Bennet replied, melancholy giving way to amusement.

Chapter 19

Darcy found Elizabeth in the rose garden, walking slowly among the flowers. Her expression was somber, and he stopped with a mixture of discomfort and alarm.

“Mr. Darcy!” she cried out when she noticed him. “I am sorry, I did not see you.”

“I apologize for intruding. Are you well, Miss Bennet?” he inquired nervously.

Elizabeth straightened her body and forced herself to look into the man’s face, “I am well, Mr. Darcy. Thank you. I am merely most distressed and, yes, I will say it, I am ashamed of myself. Miss Darcy just told me about …”

She glanced around and lowered her voice, “… about Ramsgate. When I think of how I defended that vile man, how I championed him, how I believed his lies, I am disgusted with myself.”

Darcy was shocked; firstly, that Georgiana had felt comfortable with sharing the story of Wickham’s treachery and secondly that Elizabeth so readily took on responsibility

for her own failures in trusting the man's honeyed lies.

"You are far from the first to be fooled by Wickham, Miss Bennet," he explained softly. "My own father could never accept his godson's perfidy. Sadly, my childhood playmate has all the appearance of goodness but none of the substance."

"*Some men's sins are open beforehand, going before to judgment; and some men they follow after.*" Elizabeth replied somberly. "It is from the New Testament of the Bible, Mr. Collins quoted it a few days ago during the course of a conversation on the play *King Lear*. He is correct, of course; sometimes it is obvious when a man is a miscreant, but other men hide their evil under a shining veneer of false goodness."

"That is certainly true of Wickham," Darcy agreed grimly. "He has fooled many sensible men and women."

"There were rumors before Mr. Wickham disappeared that he was not an honorable man, but I had no idea that he would do something so foul as to plot against his own godfather's precious daughter. I hope you are at peace with your sister's willingness to share

her story; I would not dream of repeating anything that she told me."

"I am glad that Georgiana felt comfortable enough to share her sorrow over what happened at Ramsgate," Darcy assured her. "It has been a source of much grief to both of us; she because she succumbed to the charms of a rogue, I because I failed to warn her about him or suitably protect her. It never occurred to me that he would track her down."

Elizabeth bit her lip, "I think that Mr. Collins's discourse on Juliet was helpful. Your sister, at fifteen, was very much under the influence of both her companion and Wickham; the latter is, in admittedly my limited experience, a most charming scoundrel with a nearly magnetic ability to entice women. I only hope and pray that he has not moved onto other, greener pastures where he can prey on defenseless women."

Darcy smiled grimly, "Wickham is in a bluer pasture, I'm afraid."

Elizabeth looked puzzled, and Darcy continued, "He is currently on board one of His Majesty's ships at sea far from England, and thus both women and shopkeepers are

safe from his dissolute habits."

"A ship?" Elizabeth asked in surprise. "That is a remarkable decision on his part, to go to sea! Surely that is a most dangerous profession."

"It was not his choice, Miss Bennet. I realized that I had a responsibility to prevent Wickham's preying on the defenseless among us. I wrote to my cousin, Richard Fitzwilliam, a colonel in the army, who arranged with a friend to have Mr. Wickham pressed into service aboard the ship. The Colonel moved with startling rapidity and swept Wickham away within days of my letter to him. At first I was startled and uncertain whether this was an appropriate response, but I now have peace that this was a good solution. Perhaps Wickham will find contentment in a hard day's work and change his ways."

"I do not think Miss Darcy knows of this?"

"She does not. I have hesitated to speak Wickham's name in her presence, as I feared it would overset her."

Elizabeth shook her head decidedly, "If you will pardon me, that is nonsense. Miss Darcy needs to know that she is safe from him.

She needs to know that he is being punished, at least in some small way, for his crimes."

He gazed down at her with admiration. When was the last time a single woman seeking a man of good fortune informed him that he was being nonsensical?

"Miss Bennet?" he said impulsively.

"Yes?"

"Miss Bennet, I have realized that I am very much in love with you. I admire you, I respect you and I hope ... well, I hope that you will make me the happiest of men by … by …"

He trailed away in confusion. Elizabeth looked, not delighted, not distressed, but stunned.

"You love me, Mr. Darcy?" she demanded incredulously.

"Yes, Miss Bennet," he replied, feeling greatly dismayed at her lack of enthusiasm at his declaration.

She stared at him, and he stared at her, and then she shook herself slightly, "I apologize. I confess that you have taken me quite aback. I am indeed honored but …"

He felt his heart clench within him, "But you do not love me."

She gazed at him, her expression troubled, “I do not know, sir. I admire you very much and I respect you. I confess that I truly did not think that you …”

She tilted her chin in her thoroughly adorable way, “How long have you been in love with me, Mr. Darcy?”

“How long? I think I was in love back in Hertfordshire. I think I was in love the first time I saw you stride into the breakfast parlor at Netherfield after walking three miles to care for your sister when she fell ill. Your cheeks and eyes were flushed, your face lovely. I think I was truly lost then, though I did not know it.”

“When my skirts were inches deep in mud, you mean?” Elizabeth inquired slyly. “Well, sir, it is indeed most charming of you to think of me in such fond terms when I know I looked entirely disarranged.”

She frowned now, “It has been many long months since then, Mr. Darcy. If you cared for me, why did you leave Hertfordshire without declaring yourself in any way?”

He hesitated and then decided that if there was to be a future between them, he must be honest.

“Because I was a fool, Miss Bennet,” he admitted. “I have long clung to the misguided notion that I owed it to my name and to my sister to marry a woman with connections and fortune. I could not forget you — indeed, you haunted my thoughts during the day and my dreams at night. When the opportunity came to invite you to Pemberley so that Mr. Collins could seek a wife, I leaped at the chance to have you here. I was foolish enough to believe that if I was in your presence, my attraction would fade. But it has not. No, every day I have felt my love for you grow.”

“And now you are declaring yourself,” Elizabeth stated with a crease in her brow. “Why now?”

“Why? Truthfully, because of Mr. Collins,” Darcy explained. “His discourse on Romeo and Juliet was not just a help to my sister, but to me as well. You are intelligent, kind, generous, an excellent sister and a good friend. When I think of the sorrows in the lives of the Princess of Wales and the Prince Regent because of their incompatibility, when I think of how many of my acquaintances are trapped in cold and distant marriages — that cannot be God’s desire for His children! My love for you comes from the heart but also the head. I

know you are the perfect woman for me and I desire most ardently to marry you, Miss Bennet — if you will have me."

Elizabeth bit her rosy lip and hesitated before speaking.

"May I have a little time to consider, sir?" she asked shyly. "I daresay that is an unusual request, but while I admit to being strongly attracted, I feel that I should not answer quite yet. You have taken me greatly by surprise, Mr. Darcy. I truly am honored and I think I will answer yes, but I must give myself at least a little time to consider. I believe it honors you and your request as well for me to be quite certain of my response."

"Of course," Darcy replied quickly. "Of course. I commend you for wishing to be certain. I will mention that I spoke to your father, who warned me that you would not accept me unless you were confident that you could return my affection. I can only hope and pray that I will earn a positive reply."

Elizabeth blushed at this and took his arm as they walked slowly and companionably back into the house and toward the main stairway; dinner would be served in an hour, and both needed to refresh themselves.

Elizabeth smiled shyly at the bottom of the stairwell just as the butler opened the doorway to the great main entrance.

"I am Lady Catherine de Bourgh," a loud, feminine voice stated imperiously. "I demand to see my nephew immediately."

Darcy's exultation gave way to shock and dismay as he turned toward his arrogant aunt, "Lady Catherine! What are you doing here?"

"What am I doing here? I find it unconscionable that you would dare ask me that, Darcy! In spite of great inconvenience, I have made the time to make a most fatiguing journey to save you from yourself. How could you be such a fool, Darcy?"

Her nephew blinked at his aunt in confusion. Certainly the lady would be most angry to know that he had proposed marriage to Miss Bennet, but there was no way she *could* know short of sorcery. After all, he had only decided to make Elizabeth an offer a few hours ago.

"May I ask to what you are referring?" he asked in a frigid tone.

"This," the lady replied with a gesture of her gnarled hand toward Elizabeth. "How

could you be so reckless as to invite two Miss Bennets here to Pemberley as well as a Miss Charlotte Lucas! Do you not know the dangers of such a thing? It is incredible that none of these women have succeeded in compromising you! You cannot trust the lower classes, nephew! You must know that!"

Darcy, outraged, drew himself to his full height only to be distracted by a soft gurgle to his left. He turned to glance at his beloved, who was struggling to hold back a laugh.

"I believe I will retire to my room to refresh myself," Elizabeth said with a twinkle in her eye. "Lady Catherine, it is such a pleasure to see you again."

"You are honored indeed to see me, not to mention to spend time in the hallowed halls of Pemberley, Miss Bennet," Catherine de Bourgh stated with a sniff. Elizabeth nodded with becoming gravity and floated up the stairs, with Darcy watching in admiration.

"Darcy, I insist that you listen to me! You must send these lowborn people away! You are a fool to trust them, and should you be compromised and forced to marry a base wife — well, the very idea is too dreadful to contemplate! Shall the shades of Pemberley be

thus polluted?"

"Lady Catherine, I must ask you to lower your voice. My guests are a charming and respectable group of individuals, and I will not allow you to insult them. Nor have you answered my question; what are you doing here? For that matter, how did you know that Mr. Bennet, his two daughters and Miss Lucas are in residence?"

"Mr. Collins told me. He sent me a letter — a very rude, insolent, ungrateful letter, telling me that he was giving up the Hunsford living. He also informed me that you had invited three ladies from Hertfordshire to Pemberley to ascertain whether one of the young women would prove a suitable wife to him. Absolute nonsense! If one of them was a suitable wife, then Mr. Collins would have chosen her back in Hertfordshire. No, it is quite obvious to me that all three ladies seek to become the next mistress of Pemberley. I will not have it, do you hear? You are to marry Anne!"

Darcy sighed as he noted, over the head of his shorter aunt, his butler standing a few yards away looking uncomfortable.

"Lady Catherine, we can discuss this in

more detail later," he said. "I am certain you wish to rest, and I am confident that Mrs. Reynolds is arranging your rooms even now."

"I will take the blue rooms."

"No, you will not, as Miss Lucas is installed there."

"What? You gave my rooms to this Miss Lucas?"

Darcy suppressed a desire to wipe his brow. Had his aunt always been this irrational?

"You arrived without an invitation or warning, Aunt. I assure you that you will not suffer in one of the other guest suites.'

"Anne must be installed next to me, Darcy."

"Anne is with you?"

"Of course she is! How else is she to marry you if she is in Kent and you are in Derbyshire? Be reasonable! But come, I must prepare for dinner. I do hope you are keeping country hours; it would be quite ludicrous to do otherwise. We will discuss all these vital matters when we are at the table."

Darcy was a brave man, a strong man, and a determined man, but he felt a sudden

terror in his soul. The mixture of his autocratic and rude aunt with Mr. Collins at dinner might well produce its own peculiar type of insanity.

At least Mr. Collins seemed quite mentally stable at this point and likely would not collapse on the floor and start screaming.

Darcy hoped.

Chapter 20

"Lady Catherine!" Mr. Collins exclaimed in surprise as the lady marched into the dining room. "What are you doing here?"

Charlotte Lucas, who had been warned by Elizabeth of the lady's arrival, placed a gentle and restraining hand on her fiancé's arm. The rector looked at her in surprise, and then smiled slightly.

"I am here in response to your absurd and insolent letter, Mr. Collins!" Catherine de Bourgh snapped, taking her place to the right of her nephew. "How dare you tell me that you are giving up the living at Hunsford? I kindly set you apart from the rest of your impoverished brethren by providing you with a good home and a good living, and now you throw my generosity in my face? How dare you?"

"I do not see it that way," Collins replied patiently. "You are an officious busybody, and I am probably the most intelligent man you will ever meet in your life. It should be clear to even an imbecile that we would not deal well together if I continued on as the rector at

Hunsford."

Lady Catherine's mouth dropped open in disbelief and her face turned a beet red, allowing Charlotte to speak softly into the ear of the man who would soon be her husband, "Mr. Collins, it is not entirely kind to call Lady Catherine an imbecile."

"I did not precisely call her an imbecile," the man said aloud in a painstaking manner, "but I do apologize if I inadvertently insulted you."

"Inadvertently? I have never been so insulted in my life, and it was most certainly deliberate. Darcy, are you going to sit there and allow this fool of a parson to abuse your beloved aunt?"

Darcy signed to the servant to begin bringing in the food and then turned wearily toward his aunt. This dinner was going to be a disaster, though at least Anne was not present; his cousin felt poorly after the long journey from Kent and was thus resting in her chambers. Georgiana, who was looking uneasy, was seated as far away from her aunt as possible and was directly next to Elizabeth, who was obviously suppressing her mirth. Mr. Bennet too looked extremely amused at the

repartee between the arrogant gentlewoman and the blunt clergyman.

"Lady Catherine," Darcy stated patiently. "Mr. Collins is my welcome guest and a most brilliant individual. As I stated previously, you arrived uninvited and unannounced; you have only yourself to blame if you dislike the tone of Mr. Collins's conversation. He does not mean to be insulting, I believe."

"I do not," Collins spoke up quickly. "I do apologize. Miss Lucas, I am counting the hours until we are wed because I truly need you to help navigate these difficult conversational hurdles."

Lady Catherine stiffened, "You are to marry Miss Lucas? Why her? Why not one of the Bennet ladies as I instructed you all these months ago?"

"Neither of my daughters wishes to marry Mr. Collins," Mr. Bennet explained, speaking up for the first time. "It was mutually agreed that Miss Lucas is far better suited to be Mr. Collins's wife than either Elizabeth or Mary."

"We are all very happy for Mr. Collins and Miss Lucas," Mary said quietly.

"That is ridiculous! The estate is entailed

away to Mr. Collins when your father dies, is it not? Miss Elizabeth, Miss Mary, one of you at least should have done everything in your power to win yourself an offer from your father's heir. I understand your portions are small, your accomplishments minimal and your beauty unimpressive. You will be lucky to win any kind of an offer at all with those deficiencies!"

There was a gasp of horror from Georgiana, Mary looked pained, Elizabeth indignant, and Darcy was suddenly furious.

"Miss Bennet, at any rate, has an offer that she is considering even now," he stated suddenly, gazing directly into the eyes of his precious Elizabeth. "I offered for Miss Bennet's hand only hours ago, and I am waiting on her decision, which she will make at her leisure."

Lady Catherine leaped to her feet in outrage, "What?!"

"I accept, Mr. Darcy," Elizabeth exclaimed, surging to her feet. "I accept your offer and will be honored to become your wife."

Darcy's eyes filled with joyful tears and a smile split his face. Mary and Charlotte cried out in delight, Georgiana squealed in ecstasy,

Lady Catherine screamed in outrage, Mr. Bennet smiled mournfully, and Mr. Collins focused on the sugar lumps in a nearby dish. It was most regrettable that they were shaped in such irregular shapes; surely a cubic form would be preferable?

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"This is utter nonsense!" Lady Catherine bellowed. "You are pledged to Anne!"

"Lady Catherine, we have discussed this ad nauseam and I refuse to continue the conversation. I am marrying Miss Elizabeth Bennet. You have no control over my life, or Miss Bennet's, or Mr. Collins's, and the sooner you accept that, the better it will be for all. I suggest you retire to bed and seek solace and peace in sleep."

"This is not over, Darcy," the lady snarled, stalking into her bedchamber and slamming the door behind her.

Darcy sighed gustily and lifted a hand to loosen the collar around his throat. His movement was halted by the sight of the door opening next door to Lady Catherine's bedchamber, followed by the appearance of a

hesitant eye in the newly formed space between door jamb and door.

"Is Mother in her room?" Anne de Bourgh whispered.

"Yes," her cousin replied wearily. He was tired of dramatic yelling, but he was a brave man; he would not scuttle away from his no doubt traumatized cousin.

Anne de Bourgh slipped out of her sitting room and hurried forward to grasp her cousin's arms with a surprisingly tight grip, "Are you indeed engaged to be married, Cousin?"

Darcy nodded and braced himself for possible hysteria, "Yes."

Anne produced the most glorious smile he had ever been privileged to see on her always wan countenance.

"Darcy, that is absolutely splendid," she cried, though softly. "Come, come, you must introduce me to your fiancée. What delightful news!"

Stunned at this unexpected response, Darcy mechanically held his arm out to Miss de Bourgh, and together they hurried down the stairs and into the library, where Mr. Bennet, Elizabeth and Mary were sitting and

talking softly among themselves. All three rose to their feet at their entrance.

"Miss Be ... Elizabeth," Darcy said, delighted that he was now permitted to address his love by her first name. "May I introduce you to my cousin, Miss Anne de Bourgh. Anne, this is my fiancée, Miss Elizabeth Bennet, her father Mr. Bennet and her younger sister Miss Mary Bennet. "

Elizabeth hurried forward with her usual charm and grace, though Darcy could tell she was slightly uncertain as to her reception. Fortunately, Anne had no desire to leave her in doubt.

"Miss Bennet, my warmest congratulations on your engagement! This is absolutely splendid news! I do not know you at all, and yet you are already one of my favorite people in the entire world. You have done what no one else has succeeded in doing; you have taken my tall, rich, handsome and dour cousin off of the marriage market!'

Elizabeth choked slightly at this but responded with a warm smile, "I assure you that I do not find your cousin dour in the least."

"Well, then you have obviously been

very good for him," Anne replied merrily. "I must confess that I was most displeased at being dragged here from Rosings, but this fantastic news makes it all worthwhile. I know my mother is outraged but I assure you that the rest of the family will be absolutely delighted."

"I am thankful that you are pleased, Miss de Bourgh," Elizabeth returned with a twinkle in her eye. "I know that Lady Catherine believed that you would be marrying Mr. Darcy and am thankful you did not share that belief."

"The very idea was like something out of a nightmare filled with frustrating situations and people who would not listen," Anne replied firmly, glancing around. "Darcy, might we have some tea? I was using the long journey as an excuse to hide in my room but I feel like I must hear the whole story of your beautiful romance."

Darcy, feeling more than slightly bewildered, left the room in search of tea. Once he had found a servant and given the order, he returned to the library to find Anne sitting cozily next to Elizabeth with Miss Mary and Mr. Bennet across from them.

“It is all about compatibility,” Anne explained, looking up at her tall cousin. “Darcy is a fine fellow — handsome, rich, intelligent — but he is quiet. I daresay you would not believe it, but I am usually quiet also. Tonight I am so thrilled at being released from the horrifying specter of becoming Mrs. Darcy that my tongue is running away from me. But Darcy needs a lively wife and frankly I would prefer to be far healthier before I marry.”

“Mr. Collins would agree with you,” Miss Mary commented. “He held forth on the importance of domestic compatibility in this very library only hours ago, and championed the idea of using one’s mind as well as one’s heart in determining a marriage partner.”

“He is entirely correct,” Mr. Bennet agreed, rather soberly.

Elizabeth winced slightly; she knew, better than most, that her own parents’ relationship was not one based on compatibility. Mr. Bennet had given way to infatuation with the lovely Miss Frances Gardiner, only to learn shortly after their marriage that his new wife was of limited understanding and prone to fits of petulance and complaining.

“In any case,” Anne continued, “I am ecstatic for you and me. When will you marry?”

Darcy and Elizabeth exchanged startled glances.

“We do not know,” Darcy admitted. “Elizabeth agreed to marry me at dinner tonight, and your mother’s volcanic eruption at the news prevented any further discussion on timing.”

“Do you wish to have a long engagement?” Anne asked curiously.

“No,” Darcy and Elizabeth said simultaneously.

The daughter of Rosings nodded decidedly, “Well, if you do not mind, let me be part of your plans since I know Mother better than any of you. If I may say so, the sooner you wed, the better; she will be like a dog gnawing on a bone so long as you are not yet married.”

“What can she do?” Mary asked practically. “Mr. Darcy is too honorable a man to renege on an engagement, and Elizabeth is far too strong minded to bow to her ladyship’s wishes.”

“She can be annoying and tedious and

loud," Anne de Bourgh retorted. "Of course, Darcy could throw her out of Pemberley, but that is probably not the best route, especially if I am ejected with her. I would like to stay at Pemberley for at least a few weeks now that I am here."

"No, no," Elizabeth said. "I would not wish for our marriage to cause a schism in your family."

"Well, that may be unavoidable given my mother's dictatorial personality, but at least we can do our best to outflank her."

Chapter 21

"Mr. Bennet."

"Yes, Lady Catherine?" Bennet inquired wearily but courteously. He had eaten an early breakfast and retired to the library in the hopes of reading for a short time. He had slept poorly the previous night, his mind and heart struggling between joy over Elizabeth's engagement and sorrow that his precious second born would never live at Longbourn again. Mr. Darcy was, he believed, Elizabeth's perfect match, but Mr. Bennet would miss his dear Lizzy.

"I wish to speak to you of this absurd supposed engagement between my nephew and your second daughter."

Bennet suppressed a chuckle. Lady Catherine, it seemed, was predictable in her own way. Miss de Bourgh had warned him that her mother would almost certainly approach him.

"What about the engagement, Lady Catherine?" he inquired politely.

The lady hesitated and then seated

herself across from him, her hands worrying the several rings on her fingers.

"You must know, Mr. Bennet, that my nephew has been engaged to my daughter since they were both in their cradles."

"That is very young! They must have been quite precocious to agree to an engagement while still yet babes."

"Do not be insolent and stupid, sir! It was my sister's fondest wish that her son would marry my daughter, and mine as well. Darcy is a man of honor, and he would never set aside my dear Anne in the ordinary way, but your daughter, through her arts and allurements, has enticed him away from his duty. Surely you must see that this is an appalling situation and against all that is right and decent and principled."

Bennet shook his head decidedly, "I reluctantly must disagree with you, madam. I am a gentleman and thus Elizabeth is a gentleman's daughter, thus she and Mr. Darcy are equal. There is no societal or moral impediment to the marriage."

"Nonsense! Your wife is a daughter of trade and your estate is entailed away from the female line. Your daughters will be mere

paupers upon your death!"

"Precisely," Bennet agreed enthusiastically. "You must see what a wonderful situation this is for our family! I will die eventually, and my younger girls left with meager resources, but of course with the Darcy fortune available, all will be well. Really, I had no idea that our trip to Pemberley would result in such good fortune for our family."

The lady grew purple with outrage at this nonchalant remark, but, after breathing harshly for a minute, managed to choke out one sentence.

"I will pay you 10,000 pounds to break up this despicable engagement, Mr. Bennet."

Bennet chuckled aloud and glanced at his watch, "10,000 pounds? That is a princely sum, Lady Catherine. Unfortunately, as much as I wish to continue this fascinating conversation, I must go. Mr. Collins and Miss Lucas are being married in less than an hour at the church in Kympton. Would you care to join us?"

The lady irritably waved her right hand, "I have no interest at all in my fool of a parson. Tell me when the engagement is at an

end, and I will arrange your payment."

"That is most magnanimous of you, Lady Catherine," he said with a bow and twinkle in his eye.

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Mr. Burke, the rector of the church at Kympton, smiled at the tall man standing nervously before him.

"Mr. William Collins, wilt thou have this woman to thy wedded wife, to live together after God's ordinance in the holy estate of Matrimony? Wilt thou love her, comfort her, honor, and keep her in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all other, keep thee only unto her, so long as ye both shall live?"

"I will," Mr. Collins said fondly, gazing down at Charlotte's face.

"Miss Charlotte Lucas, wilt thou have this man to thy wedded husband, to live together after God's ordinance in the holy estate of Matrimony? Wilt thou obey him, and serve him, love, honor, and keep him in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all other, keep thee only unto him, so long as ye

both shall live?"

"I will," Charlotte answered, smiling brightly.

The marriage ceremony continued until both man and woman heard the words for which they had been waiting.

"I pronounce that they be Man and Wife together, In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen."

There were sighs of delight from the few individuals in attendance at the wedding, and Mr. Collins and his new bride walked over to enter their names into the marriage book.

A moment later, Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy of Pemberley walked down the aisle and stopped in front of the rector, Mr. Burke.

Mr. Burke smiled at his patron and turned his attention to the back of the church where Elizabeth Bennet, dressed in her favorite gown, walked slowly down the aisle on her father's arm.

Darcy felt his breath catch in his throat. She was a vision in light green, and her hair had been carefully arranged so that her glossy ringlets fell artlessly from a twisted bun at the top of her shapely head. Was it only yesterday afternoon that he had asked her to marry him?

Only yesterday's dinner when she said 'yes'?

It had taken servants rushing to and fro to arrange with Mr. Burke for a common wedding license, but it had been done and now, today, this hour, this minute, this second, she was walking down the church aisle to be joined with him in marriage before God and man.

Fitzwilliam Darcy had never, in his entire life, been happier.

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"Thank you for allowing us to share your wedding day," the new Mrs. Darcy said to the new Mrs. Collins.

"My dear Elizabeth," Charlotte replied, looking around her at the glowing profusion of flowers in the conservatory at Pemberley, "you know that this is a dream come true. I am so happy for both of us."

Elizabeth looked up as her tall, handsome, strong, vigorous husband approached with a plate of food from the breakfast buffet, his brown eyes alight with love, his face beaming with joy.

“I am so happy,” she murmured. “So very, very happy, Charlotte.”

The door into the main house opened suddenly and Lady Catherine de Bourgh stormed in, her eyes flared wide with horror and outrage

“What is this!?” she shrieked.

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Longbourn

4 days later

“Jane, dear Jane!” Mrs. Bennet cried out in delight. “How wonderful to see you this morning, my dear. How are you feeling?”

“I am feeling better, Mama,” Jane replied, bending over to give her mother a kiss on the cheek. The child within her stirred, and she smiled brightly. The first few months of her pregnancy had been difficult but now, save for excess fatigue, Jane felt perfectly well.

“Well, do come into the sitting room, dear Mrs. Bingley. Really, how very well that sounds!”

Jane suppressed a smile. She had been

married for many months now but her mother still rejoiced in having a married daughter.

Jane waited for the tea to arrive and her mother to seat herself before sharing her news.

“Have you received any letters from Pemberley recently, Mama?”

“Not for a week, Jane, not for a week! Your father is, of course, a dreadful correspondent, but Elizabeth usually writes me at least once a week, and Mary at least every two. I do hope Elizabeth and Mary are working on Mr. Collins; he must marry one of them!”

Jane took a deep breath, “Mama, I received a letter from Lizzy this morning.”

“Oh! Is she engaged, Jane?”

“No, she is not engaged.”

“Oh dear. Well, perhaps Mr. Collins is not yet ready to make a decision.”

“He has made a decision, Mama. Mr. Collins married Charlotte Lucas four days ago.”

“Charlotte Lucas! Charlotte Lucas! That conniving, manipulative ... really, when I think of how gracious I have been, inviting her into my home. That snake …”

“Mama!” Jane interrupted, more loudly than she was wont. “There is more news.”

“What other news can be of any interest when you tell me that I will be thrown into the hedgerows after Mr. Bennet dies?”

Jane suppressed a sigh. She was herself married to a rich man and thus her mother would never be destitute, but the lady had been wailing about the entail so long that it had become a tedious habit.

“Mama, Elizabeth was married to Mr. Darcy the same day that Charlotte married Mr. Collins.”

Mrs. Frances Bennet stared at her eldest daughter with wide eyes.

“Mr. Darcy?”

“Yes, Mama. Mr. Darcy.”

“Mr. Darcy of Pemberley, with 10,000 pounds a year?”

“Yes, Mama.”

“Oh, Jane, oh dear dear Jane! You are not teasing your old mother, are you? Elizabeth is truly married to Mr. Darcy?”

“Of course I am not teasing you. He fell in love with her, she fell in love with him, and they are married.”

“Carriages! A house in Town! Such pin money! Oh, Jane, I shall go quite distracted! Mrs. Darcy! How well that sounds!”

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“Ought we go down for breakfast, Fitzwilliam?”

Darcy pulled his bride closer to him, “No.”

“I worry about your cousin,” Elizabeth murmured, snuggling closer to him in their exceedingly comfortable feather bed, “Anne must feel quite alone in this great house after her mother left in a whirlwind of outrage.”

“Mrs. Reynolds will take good care of her,” her husband whispered into her ear. “And Anne and Georgiana are developing a fine friendship. We are on our honeymoon, my love. I gave strict orders that we are to be left alone unless you really wish for some company other than myself. If you do, of course …”

“No, not at all. I like alone,” Elizabeth responded, running her hand through his tousled hair. “I like it very much indeed.”

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“Miss Bennet!”

Mary, who had been wandering the back of the glebe behind the parsonage in Bastow, looked up and felt her heart pounding in sudden excitement.

“Mr. Martyn!”

“Miss Bennet, it is wonderful to see you again,” the gangly steward exclaimed, swinging himself down from his sturdy brown mare. “I was not aware that you were still in Derbyshire!”

“Mr. and Mrs. Collins have been kind enough to invite me to visit with them for a few weeks,” she explained, her face lighting up with a delighted smile.

“Well, that is absolutely splendid,” the man replied. “I was just going to call on Mr. and Mrs. Collins. Would you be willing to accompany me?”

“I would be delighted, Mr. Martyn,” Mary agreed shyly.

Epilogue

Bastow Church

Derbyshire

1 year later

"Now remember, Mr. Collins, you will be using the wedding ceremony from the Book of Common Prayer, nothing more," Mrs. Charlotte Collins admonished gently.

Mr. William Collins, who was gazing with confusion at a vagrant twist in his white surplice, smiled lovingly at his very pregnant wife.

"Thank you, dear Charlotte. I do need that reminder. In any case, I do not feel a strong need to lecture the couple on compatibility; it seems to me, and more importantly to you, that Mr. Martyn and Miss Bennet are very compatible indeed."

"Yes," Charlotte agreed as she cleverly adjusted the rebellious sleeve of the surplice. "I believe Mary and Mr. Martyn will be happy together."

There was the sound of voices, and Mr. and Mrs. Collins turned toward the open door

of the room where Mr. Collins was preparing for the upcoming wedding ceremony. A few seconds later, Mrs. Elizabeth Darcy and her two youngest sisters, Kitty and Lydia Bennet, surged into the room in a flurry of wedding finery.

"Kitty, Lydia!" Charlotte cried out in excitement. "I am so glad you arrived here in time for Mary's wedding! Elizabeth told me that there was a delay due to your father's illness."

"We finally arrived yesterday morning," Lydia explained with a dramatic sigh. "Yes, Papa was unwell, and thus we left Longbourn later than expected. The trip itself was longer than we hoped thanks to a broken wheel on our carriage. We were stuck in a boring little town for a full day while it was repaired."

"That is a pity," Charlotte replied sympathetically, "but at least you are here now. What think you of Pemberley?"

"It is incredible!" Lydia exclaimed. "I never would have guessed that Lizzy would marry such a very rich man! She is so lucky!"

"I am lucky," Elizabeth agreed, stepping up to Charlotte and giving her a careful hug. Both ladies were in an advanced stage of

pregnancy, and thus moved with bulbous caution. “Not because Mr. Darcy is rich, but because I love him.”

“How are you, Kitty?” Charlotte asked kindly. Kitty, the fourth Bennet daughter, tended to fade into the background when in the presence of her more vibrant sisters.

“I am well, Charlotte,” Kitty said happily. “Miss Darcy is very kind and I love the rose garden. She and I are going to paint pictures of the roses tomorrow.”

“Your family is planning to stay for a few weeks, then?”

“Yes, Mama is determined to be present for the birth of her second grandchild,” Elizabeth explained cheerfully, looking down at her rotund form. “Of course, she is hoping that our child will be a boy, and I admit that so do I, but Jane’s daughter Esther is precious. Regardless of the gender of the child, I will be overjoyed. It will not be long now. ”

“It will not,” Charlotte agreed, taking a deep breath and forcing herself to smile.

“I will like living like a princess at Pemberley,” Lydia commented with a pout, “but I fear it will be a little dull. I suppose it is too much to hope that there is a militia

regiment nearby? I still need to find my red-coated officer to marry."

"That would be inadvisable, Miss Lydia," Mr. Collins proclaimed suddenly. "Most militia officers are not wealthy; a captain must be heir to property worth only 400 pounds a year, and a lieutenant but 50 pounds a year. As the daughter of Mr. Bennet, you live on an estate with an income of approximately 2500 pounds per year. In order to maintain your current style of clothing, food, and the number of servants you are accustomed to, I estimate you will require at least 634 pounds per year of income from your husband. That, of course, is somewhat dependent on your willingness, or lack thereof, to economize as needed. When children come along, expenses will increase ..."

"Mr. Collins, I believe I hear the groom arriving," Charlotte interrupted gently, taking her husband's arm and turning him toward the door.

"Ah yes, my dear, you are quite correct. Thank you. Until later, Mrs. Darcy, Miss Kitty, Miss Lydia."

The ladies curtsied and Mr. Collins strode out, leaving a wide eyed Kitty behind

him.

"Mr. Collins must be very good at sums," she said in an awed tone.

"He is good, as you put it, at almost everything," Elizabeth responded with a chuckle. "Did not Father tell you that he is a genius?"

"He is very rude," Lydia complained, wrinkling her nose. "It is not the fault of the militia officers that most are not rich."

"Mr. Collins did not say that it was their fault," Charlotte explained patiently, drawing in a deep breath. "He was pointing out that you would be well advised to consider your own needs before falling in love with a member of the militia. You would not care to do your own laundry and mend your own clothing and live in rented lodgings, would you, Lydia?"

The girl looked horrified, "No!"

"Well then, it would be sensible for you to marry a man who can support you as a gentleman's daughter," Mrs. Collins suggested. "But come, I believe it is time we all went into the sanctuary."

Elizabeth shooed her younger sisters out the door but put up a restraining hand to her

friend, “What is wrong, Charlotte? I can tell you are not well.”

Charlotte Lucas grimaced openly and put a hand on her stomach, “I am merely having more contractions than usual, Lizzy. That is all.”

Mrs. Elizabeth Darcy frowned hideously, “How often, Charlotte?”

The lady winced, “The last two were only five minutes apart, but ...”

“Five minutes?” Elizabeth hissed. “What are you doing here, Charlotte? Are they regular?”

“Yes,” Mrs. Collins admitted. “But come, Lizzy, you know first babies are always slow to arrive.”

“Usually slow, dear friend. *Usually* slow.”

“As soon as Mary and Mr. Martyn are married, uh ...!”

Elizabeth shook her head determinedly, “No, you will go back to your home now, and we will call the midwife. The last thing Mary wants is for you to have a baby in the middle of her wedding ceremony.”

Charlotte Lucas opened her mouth in

protest and then closed it. In truth, she was in a substantial amount of pain and everything was happening more quickly than she anticipated.

"Elizabeth, go into the sanctuary, and I will walk home. The parsonage is very close."

"Absolutely not. I will get you home and in your bed and arrange for the midwife to come. I know Mary will understand. If she was not marrying Mr. Martyn today, she is the one who would be walking you home."

//////////////////////////////////

2 hours later

"Is Charlotte all right?" Mr. Collins demanded, storming into the bedroom where his beloved wife was curled up on the bed, obviously in pain.

"Everything is well, Mr. Collins," Mrs. Stewart, the midwife, assured the rector. "Your child is on his or her way, sir, but everything is proceeding as expected."

"Charlotte?" Mr. Collins asked softly, his eyes dark with fear. What would he do without her?

“I am … well, husband,” the lady said, taking panting breaths. “Do not be afraid. God is with me.”

“He is, and so am I,” her husband said with determination.

“Sir, you must leave,” Mrs. Stewart ordered him. “Men are not permitted in the birthing chamber.”

“I am her husband, not a mere man,” Collins replied flatly. “I will stay and watch my child being born. I will help my wife. I am not leaving.”

Mrs. Steward was nonplussed. Never, in all her years as a midwife, had a husband insisted on staying while his wife delivered!

“It is quite all right, Mrs. Stewart,” Charlotte managed with a pained smile. “My husband will be a blessing.”

The midwife shook her head in disbelief but kept her silence. She had known Mr. Collins was an odd man, but not this odd!

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“Jane!” Elizabeth exclaimed, reaching eagerly for her four month old niece, baby

Esther Bingley. “Come here, Precious.”

The baby peered uneasily at her aunt, glanced back at her mother, gurgled, and grabbed at Elizabeth’s hair.

“Lizzy, is Charlotte well?” Jane demanded

“Yes, but the babe is on the way.”

“That is so exciting! Would you wish for me to stay here in the parsonage so you can go to the wedding breakfast at Mary’s new home? You missed the ceremony, after all.”

“No, go ahead, Jane. You do not get to spend much time with Mary, and I will be nearby at Pemberley. Mary and I will visit one another often.”

“Charles and I will be nearby as well, Elizabeth.”

“Oh Jane, truly? You liked the estate fifteen miles beyond Lambton?”

“Very much. Charles’s agent is making arrangements today to purchase the estate. We will be within twenty miles of one another, dear sister!”

“Oh Jane! I am so excited!”

“Three daughters married, Mr. Bennet, and to such fine men.”

“Yes, we are blessed,” Mr. Bennet told his wife. They were standing on the front terrace of the estate house at Bastow, their daughter Mary’s new home.

“Of course, Mr. Martyn is nothing compared to Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley,” his lady commented. “He is a second son and a steward, but at least he is a gentleman.”

“Hush, my dear,” Mr. Bennet said, “have you ever seen Mary look so happy?”

Husband and wife looked over at Mary, who was standing at her new husband’s side under a tent erected in the middle of the front lawn. Their third daughter’s eyes were glowing, and her usually pale face was flushed with joy.

“No, I have not,” Mrs. Bennet admitted. “She is very happy indeed. Oh Mr. Bennet, how hard it will be for Lizzy and Mary to be living so far from us!”

“We can visit, Mrs. Bennet,” her husband returned in a soothing tone. Unlike his wife,

Mr. Bennet knew that Jane and Mr. Bingley were also searching for a home in the north. Almost certainly he would soon have three daughters living far away from Longbourn. That reality, plus the glories of the Pemberley library, were enough to dislodge him from his comfortable home on a relatively frequent basis.

"The house is well enough, at least," Mrs. Bennet commented, turning to look up at the stone edifice of the front wall of Bastow Hall. "It is not quite as big as Longbourn, but close. It is a very fine home for a steward, to be sure."

"A steward who is married to the sister of Mrs. Darcy. Mr. Darcy told me that Bastow Hall is a wedding gift to Mary and her new husband."

"Well, that is absolutely delightful, Mr. Bennet. Three daughters married, a granddaughter born, another grandchild on the way, and Mary newly wed. We are fortunate indeed."

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"So is that the baby's head?" Mr. Collins

inquired with avid curiosity.

"Yes," the midwife replied absently. "You are doing very well, Mrs. Collins. Wait for the next contraction and then push."

"Really, I know almost nothing about childbirth," Mr. Collins commented. "Are there any books ... ?"

"William, not now!" Charlotte cried out with far less calm than usual, but then she was in considerable pain.

"I am so sorry, my dear," the man said contritely. "What can I do?"

"Hold my hand," she begged as another contraction hit.

"Very good, Mrs. Collins! The baby ... there we are."

The welcome screams of an indignant newborn baby filled the air of the room. Mrs. Stewart lifted the child away from Charlotte and quickly peeked between the infant's legs.

"It is a boy, Mrs. Collins," she cried out happily, then added, "and Mr. Collins. Congratulations to you both!"

Charlotte Collins fell back on her pillow and felt tears of joy running down her cheeks. A moment later, her tall, not very handsome

husband bent down and kissed her on the lips.

"My darling Charlotte, thank you," he murmured in a choked voice. "You are so strong and so brave, and I love you very much."

"I love you too, William."

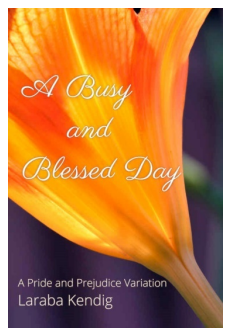
The End

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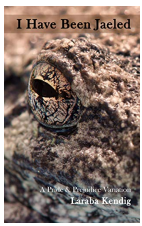
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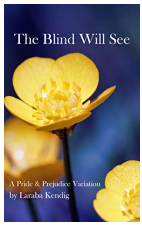
I am Jael



The Banished Uncle



I Have Been Jaeled



The Blind Will See

Available now on Amazon and Kindle Unlimited!

About the Author

First of all, let me thank you from the bottom of my heart for taking the time to read my book. I am full of gratitude for all those who have been kind enough to take a chance on an unknown author.

I was born into a family of book enthusiasts and remember gulping down James Herriot's *All Creatures Great and Small* at the age of eight while our family was on a plane hurtling toward a missionary village in Bolivia, South America. Clearly I was a precocious reader. Our current eight year old son reads very well, but he far prefers *Calvin and Hobbes* and *Garfield* to 400 page tomes about a veterinarian in Yorkshire, Great Britain.

When we returned to Michigan, USA, after our stint in Bolivia, I was 11 years old and found, rather to my surprise, that I was a good student. I dashed through junior high and high school with excellent grades and particularly enjoyed chemistry and math. What should I do with my life? I had no idea! How about engineering, people suggested? Sure, I thought, I'll give it a try!

I spent my undergraduate years at Michigan Technological University, a fine public college way, way, way north in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. Average snow fall per winter is 200 inches. Keep in mind that I spent three years of my childhood in a tropical jungle and was still a little crabby about southern Michigan winters, so it was a huge shock, but I had a great experience earning an undergraduate degree in Metallurgical Engineering. What is not to like about phase diagrams, powder metallurgy, x-ray diffraction and scanning electron microscopes? (If you don't know what those are, don't worry. Talk about obscure!)

Graduation loomed and I did not know what to do with my life. Once again, I had shown that I could take tests with the best of them, and was graduating *summa cum laude* from an excellent engineering program. I could go to work like a normal person but frankly, I was nervous about entering the big wide world of paid labor, so I made the natural choice of nerdy people, I decided to go to graduate school to become a scientist.

Five years later, I was on the cusp of earning a Ph.D. at the University of Michigan in Materials Science and Engineering. My

graduate school years were, frankly, not as enjoyable as undergraduate because I discovered, too late, that I really did not like basic research. It takes too long to accomplish anything! I prefer short projects with more immediate results. But, gritting my teeth, I dragged my unwieldy research project toward the finish line. I would get that blasted Ph.D. and get a job and do amazing things as a single, professional woman.

Enter my husband. He was a fellow graduate student and we had been friends for a couple of years. He was not a Christian and I was, so that meant we couldn't be in a relationship because I am a devout believer and had no intention of marrying a man who didn't share my faith. But then he became a Christian one day (without any influence from me, I might add.) Within eight months of that epochal decision, we were married.

I had indeed finished the Ph.D. at this point. I married a younger man (by one year and three weeks), and he was still finishing his Ph.D. I worked at the University of Michigan on the department staff while he beat his own research project into appropriate submission. When he was finished, we moved to the middle of Ohio where he took a job at the

local Air Force base and I had a baby. And then another baby, and another, and another, and when the dust cleared, fifteen years later, we were the proud parents of nine children, six girls and three boys.

For those who wish to know, yes, of course we know how it works. We are scientists!! As to why, it was very much a God thing. Also, our Lord has a sense of humor. Remember that plan of mine to be a single, professional woman? Ha!

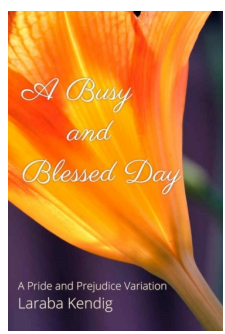
My career was mostly laid aside those many years of child bearing, though I did, and do, work a few hours a week in an x-ray diffraction facility. But the kids, naturally enough, took, and take, most of my time. When the youngest offspring was two years old, I decided to begin writing Star Wars fanfiction. (I am a total Star Wars geek of the Original Trilogy, which I watched in theaters. So I'm kind of old.)

Many hundreds of thousands of words later, I had an idea for *a Pride and Prejudice* fanfiction and thus my first book, *I Am Jael,* was born. I wrote it, I published it on Amazon, and people read it. Naturally enough, that kind of encouragement went to my head like dark chocolate so I kept writing.

So that's a little about my life story. I do hope to keep writing *Pride and Prejudice* books in the future, though the swirling horde of children continues to be my main priority.

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to my amazing publishing team: my husband Kevin (editor, publisher, marketing, photographer, etc.), my daughter Naomi (editor and graphic designer) and my daughter Lydia (editor and the girl who originally got me interested in fanfiction in the first place). You all are wonderful and I love you!

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